

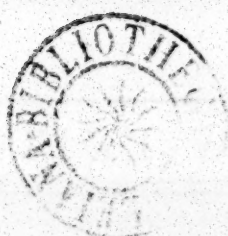
THE
W O R K S
OF
THOMAS SECKER, LL.D.

LATE LORD ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY.

A NEW EDITION.

V O L. I.

EDINBURGH:
PRINTED FOR JAMES DICKSON;
AND SOLD BY
J. LACKINGTON, CHISWELL STREET, LONDON.
1792.



ADVERTISEMENT.

ARCHBISHOP SECKER directed his studies, with peculiar energy, to that great department of theology which respects Christian virtue. His skill in scriptural criticism, and in the theory of religion, appear incidentally in the matter of his sermons; but when he pursued the detail of moral duty, he followed the bent of his genius, and held the path in which he was fitted to excel.

HAD Dr. Secker remained through life in the more private situation of a parochial pastor, his sermons would probably have been almost wholly of the same class with those which compose this first volume of the new edition; but when his merit brought him forward into the highest ecclesiastical situation, it became necessary for the Archbishop of Canterbury to attend to public cares, and to employ his talents on those subjects which involved the interests of the state, and of a national church. Of course, there occur in his works a series of sermons, respecting the rebellion, by which the religious and civil liberties of Britain were brought into hazard. There are sermons on occasions of war and peace, and on particular events affecting the state of the Royal Family. There are sermons

in defence of forms of prayer, of the English Liturgy, and of certain rites in the service of that church. There are special lectures on those parts of the service which include the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Sacraments. There are charges to the clergy, respecting the conduct of their temporalities, as well as of their spiritual vocation : And a series of controversial sermons against the errors of the Church of Rome. The public situation of the Archbishop obliged him to compose sermons on special occasions, which were preached before the House of Lords, the Lord Mayor of London, the Governors of Hospitals, and various Public Societies.

IN all the discourses which he drew up as a public man, it is easy to discern the characters of moderation, good temper, and that moral spirit, which was the favourite object to his own mind.

IN forming a comparison of sermons according to their different species, it may be allowed, that those which are occasional, or which bear an immediate respect to times, circumstances, and events, are formed upon the soundest views of utility, respecting the audiences to which they are immediately addressed; and that discourses of this description are capable of being rendered highly interesting and instructive, even to readers, in other times, and in circumstances materially different. This cannot be doubted by any person who reflects upon the characters of speciality which abound in every part even of the
New

ADVERTISEMENT.



New Testament record. It must, however, be acknowledged, that it is a matter of extreme difficulty to give that perfection to occasional discourses which may render them generally interesting beyond the circumstances to which they immediately refer. And it may be added, that discourses which regard local customs, such as the rites or liturgy of a particular Christian society, or the temporalities of an ecclesiastical body, cannot, by any power of genius, be rendered important, in the view of men who are without that circle to which the subjects are limited.

RITES, forms of worship, ecclesiastical arrangements, together with the subordinate articles of theory in religion, are subject to the variations of local fashion. Orthodoxy in these things changes sides, as we pass the Tweed, the Rhine, or the Alps. Churches may fall; opinions may change; controversies may cease; but eternal virtue remaineth, the unalterable character of the true universal church of Jesus Christ upon earth.

THE works of Archbishop Secker, while they float on the stream of time, and descend to another generation, must owe their support to those sermons purely moral, and essentially Catholic, which were suggested by his own heart, and which were dictated by the genius of the man, rather than required from the primate in his official capacity.

UNDER these views, the new edition of Dr. Secker's works is tendered to the public, in a
different

different arrangement from that which was adopted by his Chaplains after his decease. The moral sermons, which appeared to the editors the most important in subject, and the most perfect in execution, have been selected, and form the first volume. Of this volume a larger impression has been prepared than of the rest; by which means, it is to purchasers a matter of option, either to have the select moral sermons by themselves, in a single volume, or to have the whole works in four, at a much cheaper rate than they have ever been offered to the public.

THE selection of the sermons for the first volume has been made by two clergymen of a national church, different from that of England; but who own, with impartial respect, the merits of those Pastors, who, in various communions, have laboured with success in the service of the One Great Master of the Christian World.

A N
A C C O U N T
O F T H E
L I F E O F A R C H B I S H O P S E C K E R.

DOCTOR THOMAS SECKER was born in a small village, called Sibthorp, in Nottinghamshire, in the year 1693.

HIS father, a respectable Protestant Dissenter, lived on a small paternal estate. His mother was the daughter of Mr George Brough, a gentleman farmer in the same county.

THE intention of his father was, to qualify him for becoming a Dissenting Clergyman, in consequence of which, he was educated in the most eminent schools and academies in that county, in one of which he became acquainted with Samuel Butler, afterwards Bishop of Durham, and contracted a strict friendship with him, which continued to the end of life.

BUT

BUT though he had made an uncommon proficiency in all the branches of literature, proper for his intended profession, yet, from a change of sentiment, not uncommon in that period of life, in the end of the 1716, he turned his views to the study of medicine. For this purpose he went to London, and attended the lectures of all the eminent teachers in the medical line there. To compleat his medical studies, in the 1719, he went to Paris, where he attended the lectures of the most eminent professors of the art in that city. Here he first became acquainted with Mr. Martin Benson, afterwards Bishop of Gloucester.

His friend, Mr. Samuel Butler, had now taken orders, and, by his uncommon merit, acquired some valuable friends, among others, Mr. Talbot, son of Bishop Talbot, through which interest, he obtained from the Bishop a promise of patronage to Mr. Secker, in case he would take orders in the Church of England. This prospect he communicated to Mr. Secker while he was at Paris, who, after some time taken in consideration, came over to England in the 1720.

BEING introduced to Mr. Talbot, by his friend, he cultivated his acquaintance with attention, till Mr. Talbot's death, which happened soon after. Mr. Talbot left a widow and child, with whom lived Mrs. Catherine Benson, the Bishop's sister, as a friend and companion.

To enable Mr. Secker, with the greater ease, to get a degree at Oxford, by the advice of his friends, he went, in the 1721, to Leyden, where
he

he took the degree of Doctor of Medicine, and published his Thesis, which is deemed a learned performance, *De Medicina Statica*.

RETURNING to England, he entered himself a Gentleman Commoner of Exeter College, Oxford, and about a twelvemonth after, took the degree of Batchelor of Arts in that University.

IN the 1721, Bishop Talbot being appointed to the lucrative and magnificent see of Durham, ordained Mr. Secker a deacon, and not long after, a priest in St. James's church.

MINDFUL of the recommendation of his deceased son, and sensible of the great merit of Mr. Secker, the Bishop of Durham bestowed on him the valuable rectory of Houghton le Spring.

BEING now settled in the world to his wish, Mr. Secker made his addressee to Mrs Katharine Benson; and, in October 1725, was married to her, by her brother, afterwards Bishop Benson. Mrs. Talbot and her daughter came immediately to Mr. Secker's house, and, without the smallest diminution of mutual friendship, lived in his family till the day of his death.

IN this retreat, Mr. Secker entered, with uncommon zeal and fervour, into the duties of his sacred office; made great exertions to enlighten the minds of the ignorant; applied his medical skill to the relief of the poor; and, from the retired situation of his rectory, found time for the cultivation of literature, in which he much delighted. So pleasant was the recollection of

his labours here, that Mr. Secker has often been heard to say, that at Houghton le Spring, he spent some of the happiest hours of his life.

BUT Mrs. Secker's health began to decline, owing, as it was thought, to the damp situation of the place. Compassion and duty, therefore, called upon him to leave his rectory, however much he was delighted with it.

BUT as Mr. Secker, in all the steps of his preferment, never solicited himself, and often was ignorant of the cause of his elevation, till it happened, his friend, Mr. Benson, solicited and obtained for him a prebend of Durham, and the rectory of Ryton, to which he was instituted in the 1727.

AT the solicitation and recommendation of Dr. Sherlock, Mr. Secker was honoured with the appointment of chaplain to the King, in the 1732, by the Duke of Grafton, the Lord Chamberlain. We now find Mr. Secker exhibited to public view, having, from his character and station, access to the great and to the learned. His merit as a preacher, and his character as a man of worth and genius, would not allow him to remain unnoticed : Accordingly, his elevation was progressive and certain.

IN the 1733, he was appointed rector of St. James's, and that same year, not being of sufficient standing to take the degree of Doctor in Divinity, he took that of Laws, in the University of Oxford ; on which occasion he preached his
act

act sermon, on the Advantages and Duties of an Academical Education, published in his volume of occasional sermons.

THIS single sermon was considered of such merit, as to be given as the cause of his promotion to the see of Bristol, in December 1734.

IN his diocese of Bristol, and parish of St. James's, he exerted himself in the execution of his high office, with uncommon diligence and success. At that time he drew up that admirable course of lectures on the Church Catechism, for the instruction and information of his flock, which was afterwards published in two volumes.

IN Spring 1748, Mrs. Secker died of the gout in her stomach. She had been married to the Bishop more than twenty years, during most of which period, she had been in a very tender and delicate state, and had met with all the compassion and attention to be expected from a husband so benevolent and humane.

By the interest of Lord Chancellor Hardwicke, Bishop Secker was, in 1750, appointed dean of St. Paul's, and then resigned the rectory of St. James's and prebend of Durham.

IN every elevated station to which Bishop Secker was raised, he discriminated his proper duty with precision, and executed it with zeal and ability. At this period he composed, and delivered some of his admirable charges to the clergy, afterwards published in one volume.

THOUGH, from some misconception of his political conduct, he was not always a favourite at court, yet His Majesty, in the Duke of Newcastle's administration, was pleased to raise him to the see of Canterbury, in the 1758.

ARCHBISHOP SECKER, not by interest, but by personal merit, now raised to the highest degree of ecclesiastical dignity, metropolitan of all England, is it not reasonable to predict, that he would support that elevated station, with dignity and propriety?

HERE the most sanguine expectations were perfectly answered.

HE was industrious and indefatigable in the execution of his high trust; equally ready with heart and hand, in the support of the cause of religion, virtue, and literature.

THOUGH the duties of his public station might be supposed to consume most of his time, yet, by a proper distribution of it, he found leisure to compose many valuable works, besides the eleven volumes published after his death. He left behind him, a variety of manuscripts, on biblical literature, and similar subjects, which were deposited in the library at Lambeth.

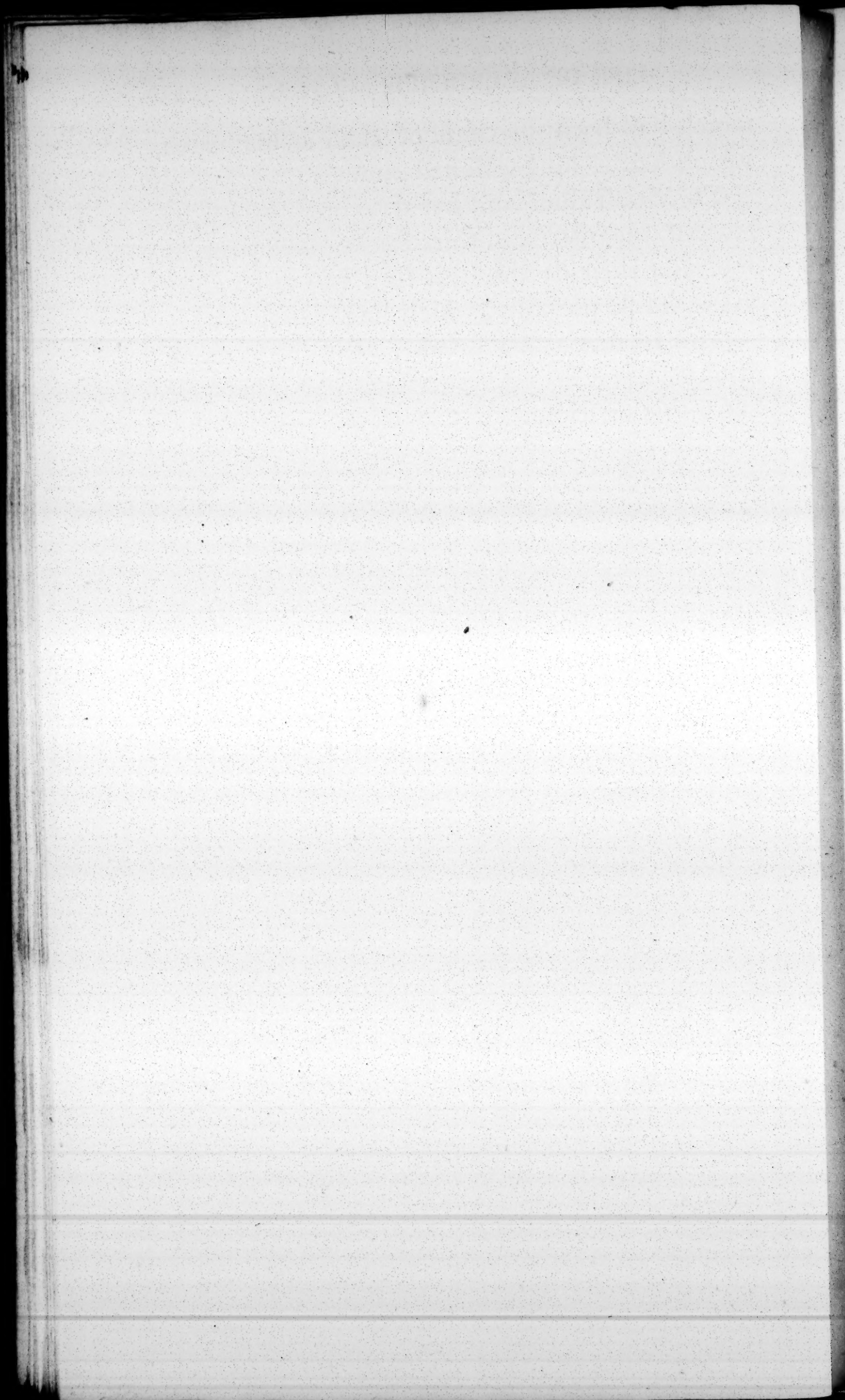
HIS Grace had been many years afflicted with the gout, which, in the latter part of his life, returned with greater violence. This, with a still more acute pain, he bore with uncommon patience. He died in August 1768, in the 75th year of his age, from a caries in the thigh-bone, which

which had been the cause of those acute pains, which had so long afflicted him.

To Mrs. Talbot and her daughter, he left by his will, the interest of thirteen thousand pounds; and after their deaths, this sum was to be given to charitable purposes, which he pointed out.

THE residue of his fortune, after the payment of some legacies to his servants and others, he left to his relations.

CONTENTS.



CONTENTS.

S E R M O N I.

On Humility.

ROMANS xii. 3.

For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith,

page 1

S E R M O N II.

The same,

11

S E R M O N III.

On Patience.

LUKE xxi. 19.

In your patience possess ye your souls,

21

S E R M O N IV.

On Contentment.

PHIL. iv. 11.

I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content,

34

S E R M O N V.

On Resignation.

PSALM xxxix. 9.

*I became dumb, and opened not my mouth : for it was thy
doing, - - - - -* page 46

S E R M O N VI.

On giving Thanks for all Things.

EPH. v. 20.

*Give thanks always for all things unto God and the Father, in
the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, -* 53

S E R M O N VII.

Of an Inoffensive Life.

ISAIAH i. 16, 17.

—Cease to do evil, learn to do well, - - - 70

S E R M O N VIII.

On Equity.

MATT. vii. 12.

*Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do
to you, do ye even so to them : for this is the law and the
prophets, - - - - -* 81

S E R M O N IX.

The same, - - - - - 93

S E R M O N X.

On Charity.

1 PET. iv. 8.

*And above all things, have fervent charity among yourselves :
for charity shall cover the multitude of sins,* - 106

S E R M O N XI.

On doing Good.

GAL. vi. 10.

*As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men,
especially unto them who are of the household of faith,* 118

S E R M O N XII.

The same, - - - - 127

S E R M O N XIII.

The Duties of the Young.

TITUS ii. 6.

Young men likewise exhort to be sober-minded, - 137

S E R M O N XIV.

The same, - - - - 149

S E R M O N XV.

The Duties of the Aged.

PROV. xvi. 31.

*The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way
of righteousness,* - - - - 161

S E R M O N XVI.

The same, - - - - 174

S E R M O N XVII.

The Duties of the Rich.

I TIM. VI. 17, 18.

Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy : that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate, - - - 187

S E R M O N XVIII.

The same, - - - - 199

S E R M O N XIX.

The same, - - - - 211

S E R M O N XX.

The Duties of the Poor.

MATT. XI. 5.

—And the poor have the gospel preached to them, 221

S E R M O N XXI.

The same, - - - - 232

S E R M O N XXII.

The Duties of the Sick.

ISAIAH xxxviii. 1, 2.

In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amos, came unto him, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live. Then Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall, and prayed unto the Lord, - - 244

S E R M O N XXIII.

The same, - - - - 256

S E R M O N XXIV.

The same, - - - - 268

S E R M O N XXV.

On Lying.

PROV. xii. 22.

Lying lips are abomination to the Lord: but they that deal truly are his delight, - - - 281

S E R M O N XXVI.

The same, - - - - 292

S E R M O N XXVII.

On Idle Words.

MATT. xii. 36.

But I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. 302

S E R M O N XXVIII.

On Anger.

EPH. iv. 26

Be ye angry, and sin not, - - - 316

S E R M O N XXIX.

The same, - - - 326

S E R M O N XXX.

The same, - - - 336

S E R M O N XXXI.

On Oaths.

JAMES v. 12.

But above all things, my brethren, swear not ; neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath : but let your yea be yea, and your nay nay ; lest ye fall into condemnation, - - - 349

S E R M O N XXXII.

The same.

EXOD. xx. 7.

Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain : for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain, - - - 361

S E R M O N XXXIII.

The same, - - - 373

S E R M O N XXXIV.

The same, - - - - - 383

S E R M O N XXXV.

On the Deceitfulness of Sin.

2 SAM. xii. 13.

*And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord.
And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away
thy sin; thou shalt not die,* - - - 396

S E R M O N XXXVI.

The same, - - - - - 408

S E R M O N XXXVII.

On Christian Perfection.

PHIL. iv. 8.

*Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things
are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are
pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of
good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise,
think on these things,* - - - 420

S E R M O N XXXVIII.

On the Divine Inspiration of Scripture.

2 TIM. iii. 16, 17.

*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable
for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in
righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly
furnished unto all good works,* - - - 433

CONTENTS.

SERMON XXXIX.

On the Usefulness of Scripture.

Same text, - - - - - 448

SERMON XL.

The same, - - - - - 460

SERMON XLI.

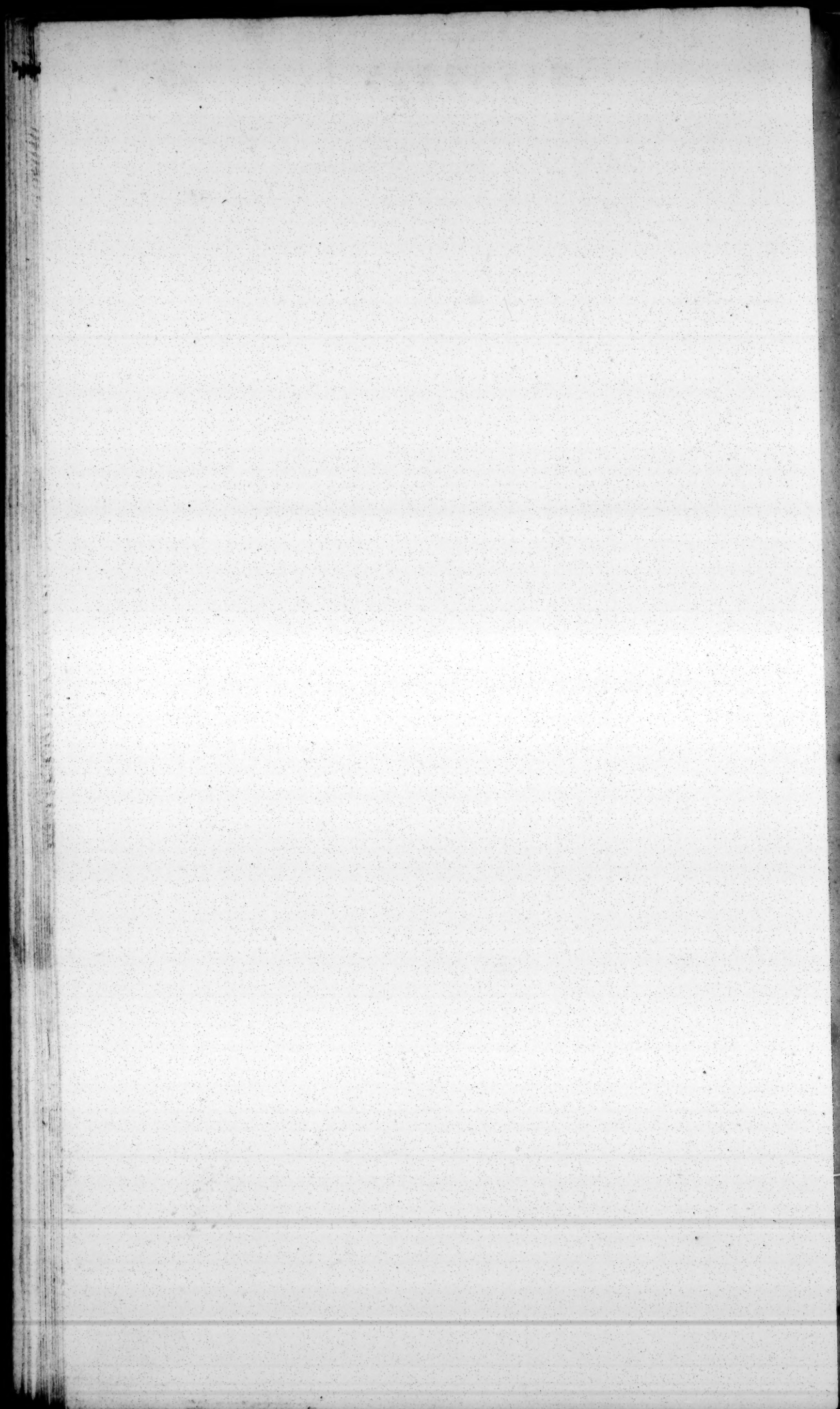
On the Duty of Reading the Scripture.

Same text, - - - - - 476

SERMON XLII.

Directions for Reading the Scripture Profitably.

Same text, - - - - - 490



SERMON I.

ON HUMILITY.

ROMANS xii. 3.

For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think: but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.

THESE words express the duty of humility so accurately, and carry in the very manner of stating it so full and clear an evidence of its obligation, that one would hope no man could read or hear them, without being convinced, that he ought to do what they enjoin.

There are directions of scripture, concerning this matter, which some pretend to be impracticable, and unfit to be practised: As where St. Paul himself exhorts, *In lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves* *; and St. Peter, *All of you be subject one to another* †. In relation to such passages, it hath been pleaded, that, were every one to think thus, many must think falsely; which we ought not to do if we could, and for the most part, in this case, cannot do if we would, but only pretend to it hypocritically: that men would be inwardly prouder and outwardly more troublesome, with this affected humility, than without it ‡: that the mockery of a mutual submission in every thing must fill human life with perpetual embarrassments; and whilst every one insisted upon obeying, no one would be left to rule or preserve order §.

VOL. I.

A

Now

* Phil. ii. 3.

† 1 Pet. v. 5.

‡ Ο γὰρ ὑπο αὐτοῦ * τυρὸς τυφομενός, πάλιν χαλεπώτερος. M. Antonin. l. xii. § 27.

* Ὑπο αὐτοῦ, vel ἐπὶ αὐτοῦ. Gat.

§ Celsus affirmed unreasonably, that Christians had learned their notions of humility from Plato misunderstood. Orig. against Celsus, vi. 15.

Now the absurdity of such behaviour indeed is very glaring. But for that reason the apostles are not to be understood, as they need not, in a sense that gives encouragement to it. Practical writers on religious and moral subjects, considering how hardly the generality are brought to entertain sufficiently strict notions of their duty, purposely express it sometimes in words, which, taken literally, would be too strict. For abatements more than enough will not fail to be made: especially in such favourite points, as that of the good opinion which we have of ourselves. But in these two apostolical injunctions, only a very moderate abatement is wanting. We are to esteem others better, or superior to us, not in things where we know they are not, but in things where we may justly suppose they are. And perhaps there is no person, or however, no pious and good person, and to such the apostles wrote, but hath the advantage of us in some particulars; or at least, from our fuller acquaintance with our own defects, may, on probable grounds, be apprehended by us to have it. Or if not, yet *esteeming* them such, may, according to a frequent use of the original word so rendered *, mean only treating them as such. And though we must not do this, by making hollow and deceitful professions of inferiority; yet we may do it, by concealing and waving our claims to superiority: not *being subject one to the other* on all occasions indeed, but on all proper ones, which are more than a few. It cannot be, that either of the apostles should intend to carry the duty further; because both of them acted in stations of authority themselves, and prescribed rules to others how to act in them. But it is peculiarly impossible that St. Paul should run into such an extreme: for he hath distinguished very exactly the obligations proceeding from the different ranks and improvements of men, which implies, that they must be conscious of them. And if he had given no other proof of his understanding the nature of humility aright, the text alone affords a strong demonstration of it.

For what doth he there say, *through the grace given unto him*, in virtue of the dignity graciously conferred upon him, to every one amongst us, for our direction in this behalf? Only, *not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man*
the

* See Job xiii. 24. xix. 11. xxxiii. 10. xli 27, 29. Phil. iii. 7, 8. See also a letter in the *Nouvelle Bibliotheque*, Sep. 1742.

the measure of faith: that is, according to the real degree of piety and virtue, which, through God's mercy, our faith to Christ hath produced; or rather, taking the word, *faith*, in a less common, but more suitable meaning, according to the real value of the several talents, which God hath intrusted to our faithful management.

This we must allow to be a most equitable way of stating the duty in general. And therefore it may be hoped we shall proceed, with willing minds, to examine more particularly,

First, What manner of thinking concerning ourselves; and,

Secondly, What manner of acting towards others, our obligation to humility, thus explained, requires. The former of these I shall consider now: the latter, God willing, hereafter. At present then let us inquire, how we ought to think of ourselves. And,

I. We ought plainly not to think, that we are possessed of any other good qualities or advantages, or any greater eminence in them, than in truth we are: which yet is a point that we frequently misapprehend. Self-love, an affection inseparable from us, tempts us to be wonderfully easy of belief in our own favour; and extremely slow to discern, and industrious to disguise, even to our own view, whatever tends to lessen us. Then, as for the information which we might receive from others, whoever hints the least thing, which is not for our honour, we suspect immediately must do it, if not from ill design, yet at best from want of judgement: and, if we can but find a shadow of probability for either suspicion, we soon conclude, that only malice or ignorance can find fault with us. To confirm which persuasion, we see perhaps the generality of our acquaintance treat us with marks of considerable regard: and this we interpret as a most undeniable token that we deserve it all; though perhaps it arises merely from their civility, and desire of living well with us. Or it may be our case, is yet worse: and we are misled by persons, who from bad motives make it their business to fill us with extravagant notions of our own accomplishments and pre-eminences. The rich and great indeed suffer most by these wretches: and therefore should above all be on their guard against them. But persons of every degree, down to the very lowest, have their flatterers. And even the grossest flattery is commonly believed: but if it be conducted with any art, it

feldom fails. And in fact, from one or other of these causes, into what astonishing errors, about their own qualifications, do we see people fall !

The instances are numberless, were no others to be mentioned, of persons deluding themselves in the most important of all points, the state of their souls: mistaking uncharitable zeal, or lifeless formality, or enthusiastic transports, for true religion ; or bad-tempered rigidity, or prudential regularity, or constitutional good-nature, for true virtue : saying inwardly, as the revelation of St. *John* expresses it, *I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing ; and not knowing, that they are wretched, and poor, and blind, and naked* *. But in such matters also, as others are apt to value themselves upon, how established an observation is it, that, from things of the greatest importance down to the veriest trifles, almost all the world are continually judging wrong of their own title to esteem ; and vain of imagined excellencies, where at most they do but equal those about them, or perhaps are peculiarly deficient. We can easily remark this in our neighbours : but we strangely overlook it in ourselves ; and forget, that their failings are only those of human nature ; to which, with the same nature, we are just as liable, and it may be, full as guilty of them.

Some few indeed, through excess of modesty, or weakness of spirits, or strength of temptation, fall into the opposite extreme, of diffidence, or even despondency. And these, were they to *think soberly* and justly, would think better of themselves ; to which they ought to be excited with the most compassionate earnestness. But the general caution, to the rest of us, must ever be, not to think too well : to make sure of abating sufficiently from what they who pay court to us would suggest ; and attend to the less favourable judgments concerning us, that others pass : not to bear them the least ill-will on that account ; but solely to learn that knowledge of ourselves, which we are happy, if we learn any way. The best of outward monitors indeed is a faithful and prudent friend ; if we have such a one, and will permit him to act as such. But the main article is, that each take care to be his own friend ; by studying his own qualifications impartially, and as one bound in conscience to be an upright judge. *For if a man think him-*
self

self to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself. But let every man prove his own work *.

2. Having examined what our qualifications are, the next point is to settle the true value of them. For one person is proud of what another despises: and therefore we have done nothing, till we have fixed what things deserve esteem, and in what degree.

Now, indisputably the strongest claim is that of a pious and benevolent and reasonable disposition, expressed in a suitable behaviour. This, however disregarded by a thoughtless world, is the *one thing needful* †: the ground-work of private and public, of present and future happiness. The human heart, notwithstanding its degeneracy, loves and reverences it, even though unwillingly, wherever seen: superior orders of beings look down upon it with complacency, and God himself approves it, as his own resemblance. To this character then let every one aspire, who seeks true honour, and place nothing in competition with it. *Thus, saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom; neither let the mighty man glory in his might; let not the rich man glory in his riches. But let him that glorieth, glory in this; that he understandeth and knoweth me; that I am the Lord, which exercise loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord* ‡.

But then we may value ourselves, even on this acknowledged excellency, much too highly. For indeed a temper and conduct of unmixed obedience, would be no more than plain reason and common sense dictates. And therefore our Saviour's precept is absolutely right: *When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants, that is, we have merited nothing: we have done that which was our duty to do* §. Right behaviour is only what ought to be expected: wrong behaviour is the thing to be wondered at. And therefore when any one admires and is astonished at his own goodness, in all likelihood he is but lately and imperfectly become good; and holds himself in such account for what he doth, either because he doth it with difficulty, or because he understands but in part what he ought to do. For they who act from confirmed habits, act with ease; and
imagine,

* Gal vi. 3, 4.

† Jer. ix. 23, 24.

‡ Luke x. 42.

§ Luke xvii. 10.

imagine, that others would of course do as well and better, being very sensible of their own failings. Or however perfect the self-applauder may be in the eyes of men, his *heart is not right*, but far from it, *in the sight of God* * : nor will he have taken one single effectual step towards the kingdom of heaven, till he is filled with a deep sense of his own sinfulness, and unworthiness to be accepted, otherwise than through him, *who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption ; that, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord* †.

If then we may think too favourably of ourselves, even for our piety and virtue ; how much more for other qualities, which are good or bad only as they are employed !

Some insist greatly on their high birth, or distinguished rank. And unquestionably honour is due to all superiors ; and especially to those, whose ancestors also have been of remarkable note and worth ; which their descendents may be successfully excited to imitate, by seeing it thus respected. The education of such too should be of the best kind. And therefore we readily presume on these accounts, that their dispositions likewise are noble and generous, like the blood which runs in their veins, and the company which they are qualified to keep. But still this is only presumption. When it proves true in fact, they are the supports and the blessings of society. But when the contrary happens, though, whatever submission their station requires, or prudent custom hath allotted to them, should be carefully paid ; yet they ought to be very sensible of the essential distinction between external deference and inward veneration ; and properly reminded, if there be need, how much more honourable it is to be a wise and good person ones self, than to be sprung from ever so many ; and to be useful in the lowest condition of life, than mischievous or insignificant in the highest.

Others claim to be valued on their superior wealth. And in case it was acquired by laudable methods, and is applied to beneficial purposes, their claim in its degree is just. But if they have gained it by fraud or extortion or servility ; if they abuse it to the service of luxury or vanity or oppression ; or withhold it from those to whom reason and religion direct them to impart of it ; the poorest wretch on earth, with an humble
and

* Acts viii. 21.

† 1 Cor. i. 30, 31.

and contented and honest heart, is unspeakably worthier of esteem than they.

Another foundation of self-complacency with some is their dexterity in business, and carrying on the designs which they form. But of what sort are their designs? what ways do they take to attain them? are their acquaintance and neighbours, their country and mankind, the better or the worse for their abilities? If *the wise in their generation** cannot return good answers to such questions as these, they must not expect very sincere congratulations from others on this notableness of theirs; and sooner or later they will find but little comfort in it themselves.

A more innocent claim to reputation, for the most part, is that of superior knowledge and learning. Yet *science, falsely so called*†, may be pernicious beyond any thing: especially that horrible sort which dissolves the ties of religion and morals, and supplants the hopes of eternal happiness. Yet there are persons who can be vain of it. But even true knowledge deserves our praise chiefly in proportion to its usefulness: and the most useful of all, being that which is the most common, affords but small ground for over-weening self-opinion. Besides, the more we really know, the more conscious we shall be how imperfectly we comprehend things, and how much there is left behind, of which we are ignorant. When therefore St. Paul saith, that *knowledge puffeth up*, he means imaginary and misapplied knowledge. For he adds, that *if any man thinketh that he knoweth any thing*, that is completely, *he knoweth nothing yet, as he ought to know*‡. And such conceited fancies, making men negligent and rash, and prompting them to despise the judgments and reasons of others, lead them into perpetual errors.

As for the other temptations to pride, which prevail with the gay and thoughtless, it would scarce be proper to say more about them from hence, than to beg they would reflect, how short-lived and precarious, how trifling and ridiculous, the things often are, on which they, in good earnest, plume themselves: how few have ever been lastingly the happier for them, even in this world, beyond which they cannot extend; how many have been betrayed to eternal as well as temporal ruin,

by

* Luke xvi. 8.

† 1 Tim. vi. 20.

‡ 1 Cor. viii. 1, 2.

by injudicious fondness of excelling in them. So important is it to proportion our affections duly: for want of which, multitudes are proud of their vices, and *glory in their shame* *.

3. After this we must proceed to examine, what deductions are to be made from the value of our accomplishments and advantages, on account of our deficiencies and disadvantages. For till we have balanced the one against the other, we can no more judge of our own merit, than we can of our wealth, by casting up the sums, which are in our possession, or due to us, without stating what we owe. One immoral, mean or disagreeable quality may obscure the lustre of many virtues and ornaments. Nay, some faults may give so unhappy a turn to dispositions very laudable in themselves, as to make them do harm instead of good: and much more then may those which are of a nature indifferent, or valuable only in a lower degree, be so perverted. Unless therefore we search into this matter, we shall in effect know nothing of ourselves. And as it is yet more mortifying to acknowledge things which make against us, than to quit our pretensions to those which make for us; without the utmost care, we shall certainly decide partially in our own favour on the present head. But,

4. Supposing that danger avoided, a further direction, equally needful, is, to be cautions in comparing ourselves with others. This we are commonly in so much haste to do, that it plainly shews, which of the scales we design beforehand shall preponderate. Now judging too harshly of others, both injures them, and may greatly mislead us: judging at all of them is but seldom needful: and usually judging right is very difficult. Their circumstances and characters are often unknown, often purposely misrepresented. Modest secret merit is frequently the greatest: and qualifications, not so shining as ours, may be more beneficial. They, who have considerable defects, which we have not, may be free from as considerable ones, which we have; or be indued with virtues, which may amply compensate for them. If we resolve to compare, we ought to make allowance for every thing of this kind: and provided we make it duly, we may begin our comparisons as soon as we please; but shall perhaps have more comfort in letting them alone. For if we begin, we must not think to stop at those instances,

where

* Phil. iii. 19.

where we previously know the result will be such as we like. Most persons may find some, or many beneath them, in birth, fortune, influence, agreeableness, understanding, temper, morals. But it would be generally full as easy, if it were but near so pleasing, to meet with many more, greatly above them in these respects, without seeking extremely far for it. Nor, if we make the comparison only with such as we despise; it is a poor pre-eminence to be superior to the despicable. If only with such, as are just about us; we lie open to St. Paul's reproof, of those, who *measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves amongst themselves, are not wise* *. And if we extend our inquiry to a greater distance; we may quickly discover numbers, to whom we shall be tempted to look up with envy; and they to look down upon us, if we are known to them, with pity or contempt.

But, even on the supposition, that we could maintain a rank, in our several pretensions, amongst the foremost of mankind; yet there remains,

5. Another most material point to be considered, what is man? still we should find ourselves poor, helpless, frail, short-lived wretches, liable every moment to lose every thing that is valuable in us, and suffer every thing, that is dreadful to us. Still the imperfections, that we have in common with the basest of our kind, would make up a far greater part of our condition, than the advantages that exalt us above them. And *why is earth and ashes proud* †?

But if it be needful, to make us more fully sensible of our low estate, let us lift up our thoughts to those numberless hosts of celestial natures, whose perfections though finite, are yet beyond our conception, much more our attainment: and to whom probably the first of men bears no greater a proportion, than a creeping worm to one of us. For indeed, if we do but reflect, how little we are removed from the brute creation; how like them we are in our make, our wants, our passions, our follies: there will be cause to think, that we are the meanest of rational animals, barely deserving the name: above whom there are innumerable orders and worlds of beings, each rising beyond the other; and yet the highest immensely distant from that one, before whom they are all *less than nothing and vanity* ‡.

VOL. I.

B

What

* 2 Cor. x. 12.

† Eccclus. x. 9.

‡ Isa. lx. 17.

What then are we? were we underived, were we independent, yet our whole race, and the whole earth we tread on, is a trifle in the universe, that makes no figure in it, and would scarce be missed out of it. But indeed the low existence that we have, and the little pre-eminences that belong to each of us in it, are not from ourselves, but owing to the bounty, and held by the pleasure, of another. All our natural powers and accomplishments are the work of his forming hand: all our outward advantages are appointed by his providence: all our improvements in goodness flow from his grace. *Who then hath made thee to differ from another; and what hast thou, which thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it; why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it*?*

But a still more important consideration is, that we have received whatever we have, not as a gift to be used in the manner we please; but as a trust, to be employed for our own advancement in piety and virtue, for the benefit of our fellow-creatures, for the honour of our creator; to whom we must shortly render an account of our stewardship. The more hath been committed to us, the more we have to answer for: and not one of us is able to answer otherwise, than that in a greater degree or a less, (God grant it be not a very great one!) we have neglected our duty, committed sins, and abused every talent put into our hands.

If then we will *think of ourselves soberly, and as we ought to think*, we have abundant cause to think with the utmost self-abasement: instead of unprofitable and misleading comparisons one with another, each to compare our own hearts and lives with God's holy laws: and being thence made sensible, how much we need his mercy, submissively to apply for it, in the method which he hath prescribed, through the merits of our blessed redeemer: *taking his yoke upon us, and learning of him to be meek, and lowly in heart; for so shall we find rest unto our souls†: being all subject one to another, and clothed with humility; for God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble‡.*

* 1 Cor. iv. 7.

† Matth. xi. 29.

‡ 1 Pet. v. 5.

SERMON II.

ON HUMILITY.

ROMANS xii. 3.

For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think: but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.

EACH of the virtues, which God requires us to practise, may be considered, either as being seated in our hearts, or exerted in our behaviour. That which the text enjoins, taken in the first of these views, consists in forming a right judgment of our own qualifications, rank and circumstances. If any one hath already no more than a just opinion of these, he hath no need to lower it. But because we almost universally conceive too high notions of ourselves; condescending to entertain and act upon true and reasonable ones, hath acquired the name of humility or lowliness. And our obligation to be humble in heart comprehends the following particulars: That we never imagine ourselves to have any pre-eminences or accomplishments, that we have not; nor esteem such as we have, beyond their undoubted value: that we attend to our own faults and deficiencies, no less than the things in which we excel: that we be not fond of comparing ourselves with others; and that, if ever we do make such comparisons, we make them fairly, and with proper diffidence; and extend them to the persons by whom, and the cases in which, we are likeliest to be outdone: that we often call to mind the meanness, the frailties, the infirmities, the uncertainties of our mortal state; the immense numbers of known, and probably of unknown, orders of beings, adorned with glories, though finite, yet far beyond human conception; and the absolutely boundless perfections of our and their creator: to whose voluntary gift what any of us

enjoys above another, is owing : who can deprive us the moment he pleases, of our most favourite advantages ; and will demand from us one day a serious account of the use that we have made of them : which the best of us all must be sensible, and few of us, if any, are sensible enough, hath in many respects been a wrong and bad one.

This then is the first part of humility ; bringing down to real truth the exalted imaginations, that are strangely apt to get possession of us. The remaining one, after thinking reasonably and modestly, is acting so. But in order to this, two previous rules must be observed.

1. The first is, to keep always in our minds the right estimation, which we are now supposed to have formed of ourselves ; and especially to remember the mortifying parts of it : for the others we seldom forget. Some persons indeed are addicted, above all, at some times, to look only on the dark side of things : and they should be directed with prudence to dwell proportionably on the more cheering views. But the sole caution, which the generality need, is to moderate their fondness for the pleasing employment of contemplating the advantageous part of their own characters or circumstances. And every one, the greater bias he perceives in himself that way, for he may soon perceive it if he will, should apply the greater watchfulness to correct it.

2. The second rule is, that, be our rank amongst our fellow-creatures, in any respect, as low as it will, we must accommodate our minds to it, and never indulge any fraudulent affectations of seeming superior to what we are. All persons indeed, not only should improve themselves, but may also mend their situation, by every lawful method they can. And so far as mere silence in the mean time is a concealment, it is a very innocent one. But to talk or behave unsuitably to our condition, in order to make a better figure than we have a right to make, is by no means allowable : nor even to be inwardly disturbed at its being such as we find it. Our present station is what the providence of God hath for the present placed us in : and who are we, to say or think it is beneath us ? We are not to chuse the part that we shall have to act on the stage of life : and if we are wise, we shall be glad that we are not. Well may it suffice, if, whatever is assigned us, we act it properly. Doing this with cheerfulness, we shall be *acceptable to God, and*
approved

approved of men * : whereas he, who labours to procure honour by cheating the world with false appearances, will be always uneasy in himself, and soon detected and despised by other men. So that indeed to live in a lie is no more prudent than lawful.

Resolving therefore to preserve constantly in our thoughts what we really are, and be contented not to pass for more; let us examine, what behaviour must appear to us, in such a state of mind, rationally humble; first towards our superiors, then our equals, and lastly our inferiors.

I. To our superiors in any kind, evidently we ought to pay, readily and freely, all that submission, which is their due: and if we perceive within, a reluctance to acknowledge their superiority, or an eagerness to dispute the degree of it, we should mark that for a sure indication and bad symptom of pride.

One sort of pride there is, almost too shocking to mention, of which yet the human heart is frequently guilty: pride against God. This we shew in a dreadful manner, when we can hardly condescend to humble ourselves before him, and worship him; or seem ashamed of the homage that we pay him: when we take upon us to chuse, which of his laws we will obey, and which not: when we vainly pry into the secrets, that he hath hidden; or presume to despise, either the plainness, or the mysteriousness, of what he hath revealed: when we venture to commit sins, in confidence that our imagined virtues will compensate for them; or treat the gospel-terms of forgiveness, through the merits of a crucified Saviour, as too degrading: when we ascribe to ourselves the good actions, which he enables us to do, or the prosperity, which he grants us to enjoy; or at any time express or conceive indignation at his disposal of the affairs of his own world. As the humility, which we owe to our maker, is beyond comparison the deepest: so must a failure in it be unspeakably the most criminal. Therefore let us watch over ourselves in this article with the utmost care.

And, in the next place, as to our earthly superiors: whatever persons have authority over us, more or less, let us willingly pay them the obedience and the respect, which belongs to their station; accepting with all thankfulness the benefits that we receive from their superintendence; and making such equitable allowances for their mistakes and frailties, as we, in the same

* Rom. xiv. 18.

same circumstances, might perhaps have much greater need of, than we can easily imagine: *not exercising ourselves in matters that are too high for us**; nor fancying, that every one is qualified and situated to judge of every thing. Whatever persons are in rank above us, though without authority, let us give them all such demonstrations of honourable regard, as may prove our acquiescence in the distributions of a wise, though unsearchable providence, as may strengthen the subordinations, which are necessary in society; and procure us a return of goodwill and esteem. Those who have either naturally better understandings, or a larger share of acquired knowledge; let us pay, not an unlimited, but a reasonable deference to their judgments, and take pleasure in learning from them. Those who are noted for piety and virtue; let us reverence and love them, and make them our patterns. In a word: whoever hath any pre-eminence of any sort, our duty is, on all fit occasions, to own it, both in word and deed: not with artful contrivances to depreciate what we profess to recognize; but with such fairness and simplicity, as we should expect ourselves.

II. Towards our equals, humility of behaviour consists in shewing, that we are satisfied to live with them on equal terms; *being kindly affectioned to them with brotherly love, and in honour preferring them*†, as the apostle exhorts, a few verses after the text: not demanding the respect, that we dislike to pay again; but setting the example of courteous and obliging demeanour: not insisting, that our humour or interest should be more regarded, than that of others, who have as good pretensions; but submitting, for the sake of peace, to whatever, with tolerable convenience and propriety, we can: not seeking to engross, and confine to ourselves, the esteem, the friendship, the good offices of every one; not complaining, whenever another is preferred to us, though by one who hath full right to do as he pleases; nor, even if the preference be unjust, resenting it, as a more heinous crime for our being the sufferers, than if it were a different person; but bearing with the faults of our fellow-creatures, as we hope to have them bear with ours. All these things are so plainly equitable, that perhaps we can scarcely believe, that we ever fail to observe them. There can be no harm however in a little self-inspec-
tion

* Psal. cxxxix. 2.

† Rom. xii. 10.

tion upon the subject. If it confirm our good opinion of our own conduct, it will give us great delight: if not, it may do us great service, by leading us to amendment.

III. Humility of behaviour towards our inferiors, on which I shall chiefly enlarge, must be differently expressed in different cases. For some kinds of superiority ought not to be concealed, but supported and exerted. Parents, magistrates, rulers and officers of all kinds, would offend against their duty, were they to make their authority insignificant, by too large or unseasonable condescensions. Their humility therefore consists in acting as persons, intrusted with power, nor for their own sake, but that of others: in assuming no greater dignity, than is manifestly requisite for good ends: in joining with it always humanity and affability, and continuing, in the midst of it, to know themselves: in procuring diligently, and hearing impartially, true information and faithful advice: being reasonable in their commands and expectations, moderate in the burthens they impose, merciful in the punishments they inflict; and in *watching* over all committed to their care, *as they that must give account; that they may do it with joy, and not with grief**.

But, where pre-eminence carries no authority along with it, an humble mind will be very backward to claim it; for seldom any desirable effects will follow, and often many bad ones. It may not only give needless pain to others, which ought never to be done, but incite them to envy and ill-will, produce contentions and injuries. Most persons are uneasy at seeing themselves in a state of inferiority: and therefore both good-nature and prudence forbid us to remind them of it without necessity. If we are acknowledged to be superiors, humility, assisted by a little discretion, will contribute much to perpetuate the acknowledgement. And if the case be doubtful, haughtiness is by no means the way to procure a determination in our favour. People are not willing to let that be extorted from them by overbearing violence, which, if left to themselves, they would have granted with pleasure, and invited us to accept, as an equitable tribute. Finding any one take upon him, without a call to do so, alarms every one: they know not, how far the matter will be carried; put themselves on
their

their guard, and set up pretensions in opposition. And, if the question comes once to be tried by popular opinion, the world, we know, is exceedingly apt to judge wrong, especially when provoked to it. And if, after all, the point should be given against us; what a superfluous disgrace shall we have brought down upon our own heads, by indulging a spirit, the most incapable of bearing disgrace that can be! *Solomon's* counsel therefore is full of wisdom. *Go not forth hastily to strive, lest, thou know not what to do in the end thereof, when thy neighbour hath put thee to shame* *. But indeed success, in a competition of this nature, may be altogether as hurtful, as disappointment: by inspiring men with a vanity, which may prove the parent of many sins and follies; may expose them to much ridicule, and bring them also into more serious inconveniences.

Nor must we avoid only such open and gross claims to superiority, but the indirect one of an assuming air and manner: which some have, to so strange a degree, that they neither do nor say any thing, without intimating their own importance. Indeed our very expressions of civility may have insolence mixed with them: for what is it less, if instead of treating those unaffectedly and frankly as our equals, whom we ought, whether absolutely such in all respects or not; we take pains to signify to them politely, that we have the goodness to stoop beneath our rank, in order to put ourselves on a level with them? Nay, were we in no way to claim regard from others, but in the most submissive and insinuating way to court it; yet scarce any thing is remoter from true lowliness of mind, than that behaviour, which most solicitously disguises itself under the appearance of it, and enables us to climb by creeping. Or even supposing neither interest nor advancement to be our point, but applause only: still, both acting from a view to gain it, and taking too much pleasure in the consciousness of having gained it, are snares highly dangerous to humility. And many a man, of otherwise virtuous dispositions, hath by this one weakness, of delighting in his own praises, been corrupted insensibly within; and brought to deserve an extremely different character from that which he coveted.

But to return. If concealing our superiority be for the most part right; resenting a delay, or even refusal, to acknowledge

knowledge it, must be exceedingly wrong. Other persons may very innocently be ignorant of our merit; may have no concern to inquire about it; may be no judges of it; or may be, on the other hand, better judges than we; and perceive, that we over-value ourselves. But suppose they mistake, or, yet worse, are unwilling to do us justice; we are all so liable to the same failing, that we must forgive it each other of course, or there can be no longer any peace upon earth.

But farther: As no displeasure should be expressed towards our inferiors on such occasions, no contempt should be expressed towards them on any occasion. The distance is not so extremely great between the highest and lowest of men; besides that they, who are inconsiderable in one respect, may deserve highly in another; perhaps more than he, who despises them. Indeed no one is truly despicable, but for his wilful follies and sins: and the sight of these ought to give us concern, instead of triumph; especially as we have all too many of our own. But for the rest, be the outward circumstances of others ever so mean, be the defects of their persons or understandings ever so remarkable, the disposer of all things might have placed us originally in a condition full as wretched, and may even still reduce us to it. Therefore *laugh no man to scorn in the bitterness of his soul: for there is One, which humbleth and exalteth**. Yet how needlessly and wantonly do persons often make their inferiors, especially in rank and fortune, suffer by their slighting and over-bearing usage of them, both in words and actions! For an insolent word, or even a haughty look, is enough to cause bitter affliction to him, that knows he must bear it, whether he deserves it or not. And when, to speak in the son of Sirach's language, *The rich man hath done wrong, and yet he threateneth withal; when the poor is wronged, and he must intreat also†*; the more helpless the condition is, the more severely the injury is felt. For people of the lowest class have by nature just the same sensibility that others have. And if others would reflect, how painful the feeling of such ill usage is, they would surely scruple inflicting it on their fellow-creatures; as not only barbarous, but ungenerous: for all the good uses of subordination might be as well, and much better, secured by gentler means.

VOL. I.

C

But

* Ecclus. vii. 11.

† Ecclus. xiii. 3.

But superiors too frequently consider those beneath them, as worthy of no attention ; and their most serious concerns in life, as things to be played with, and sacrificed to every caprice. Now this is one of the most pernicious kinds of pride. Let any one think ever so much too highly of himself ; so long as he keeps it to himself, or only gives out a few slighter intimations of it, though he is very blameable, yet he is tolerably harmless. But there are many, who crush their inferiors under their feet, without minding them : though perhaps, from principle, such as it is, they would behave to one of their equals in a quite different manner. But so far all men are equal, that the meanest wretch on earth hath the same right to live unmolested and free from insult, as the greatest monarch. And the elevation of one above others, far from authorizing him to trample upon them, strictly binds him, to show humanity, and afford protection, to all those, whom providence, by putting them under his power, hath intitled to his patronage.

This then is the conduct, which humility requires of superiors. And to preserve it steadily, they should call to mind every day, that the world was not made for them alone, to gratify their vanity or love of pleasure, to indulge their humours, or pursue their advantages, whatever becomes of the rest : but with intent that each of them should contribute faithfully in his station, as well as others in theirs, to the common benefit of the whole. For God hath created all men of the same nature and the same blood : and united them by strong inward ties of sympathy and mutual tenderness, which it is both impious and unnatural to break or loosen. *If I have withheld, saith Job, the poor from his desire, or have caused the eyes of the widows to fail ; if I did despise the cause of my manservant or my maid-servant, when they contended with me : what then shall I do, when God riseth up ; and when he visiteth, what shall I answer him ? Did not he, that made me, make him ? and did not one fashion us in the womb* ?* We, that are so fond of exalting ourselves above those of our own species, who are equal to us in most things ; preferable, it may be, in many ; and beneath us only in accidental circumstances ; do we consider, before how awful a superior we stand all the time ? One
that

* Job xxxi. 13,—16.

that *accepteth not the person of princes, nor regardeth the rich more than the poor: for they are all the work of his hands**. But, happily for the universe, his infinite greatness is inseparably joined with infinite mercy and bounty: which blessed union is the very ground of the worship that we pay him, of the honour and love, that fills our hearts at the thought of him. And what is it then, that deserves love and honour amongst men? Surely to imitate this adorable goodness of him, who *is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens: who yet humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven and earth†*. For though the Lord be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly; but as for the proud, he bebloweth them afar off‡.

Let us therefore delight in shewing ourselves, by all fit proofs of condescending benevolence, the true children of our heavenly Father, and the true disciples of our gracious Redeemer; who hath made us all members of one, that is, his own body: and whose rule it is, *whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant; even as the son of man came, not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many§*. The same lesson, of not disdaining the very meanest offices of kindness, one to another, when occasion requires them, he taught his apostles, and through them all his followers, in a manner so unspeakably engaging, just before his death, as one of the farewell demonstrations of his tender affection to them; (for so the evangelist puts it;) conveying his meaning the more expressively, as the eastern custom was, by an outward action, peculiarly fitted to exemplify it: that I shall read you almost the whole passage, as the best conclusion, that can be made to a discourse on the present subject.

Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come, that he should depart out of this world unto the Father; having loved his own, which were in the world, he loved them unto the end. And supper being ended, he laid aside his garments, and took a towel and girded himself. After that, he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples feet, and to wipe them with the towel, wherewith he
was

* Job xxxiv. 19. † Ps. cxiii. 4, 6. ‡ Ps. cxxxviii. 6. § Mat. xx. 26, 27, 28.

was girded. And after he had taken his garments, and was sat down again, he said unto them, know ye, what I have done unto you? Ye call me master and lord, and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your lord and master, have washed your feet, ye ought also to wash one another's feet; for I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done unto you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, the servant is not greater than his Lord; neither he that is sent, greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye, if ye do them*.

* John xiii. 1,—17.

S E R M O N - III.

ON PATIENCE.

LUKE XXI. 19.

In your patience possess ye your souls.

THE unpleasant things which befall us, in one part or another of this life, are so many ; and the impressions, which they make upon us, are commonly so strong ; that being affected by them no otherwise than we ought, constitutes a large and difficult part of our duty : which therefore I shall endeavour to explain and recommend to you in several discourses. And as some things are immediately and necessarily uneasy to us, and some only by means of needless and unreasonable reflections and comparisons of our own state with what others are, or with what we might have been : I shall speak at present of bearing what we cannot but feel disagreeably, with composure, which is usually called Patience ; in the next place, I shall direct to the like behaviour under comparative misfortunes, which is generally expressed by the name of Contentment ; and after these moral obligations, which however need not and cannot well be altogether separated from those of piety, I shall proceed to lay before you more distinctly the religious ones, of resignation first, and then of thankfulness, under every affliction and seeming disadvantage.

Now the feelings unavoidably disagreeable to us, and tempting us to impatience, are chiefly pain, sorrow, fear and anger.

I. Pain : under which may be comprehended also sickness, restlessness, and languid lowness. These are often so grievous, by their degree, or continuance, or both ; that we cannot fail, from the very make of our nature, to suffer under them extremely : and stifling at such times all expressions of suffering, and earnest wishes of ease, would usually require too violent an effort to be lasting ; or perhaps to be safe, even could we
persist

persist in it. Besides, these external marks of distress were certainly designed by Providence to excite a proper degree of pity and assistance from those around us; which, without some powerful calls upon them, would frequently be withheld. And therefore we ought neither to condemn ourselves, nor others, who may possibly undergo far more than we imagine, for some strong expressions of present misery: nor think it a very heinous fault, if they now and then exceed the proper bounds. But still the more calm and moderate we are, the more we shall appear, if not to need, yet to deserve, both compassion and relief; and they will both be afforded us with more good-will and regard. Then further, all vehement complaints and immoderate significations of our wretchedness, heighten strangely our own sense of it; and thus either work us up into wild rage, or sink us down into spiritless dejection; and so make our case much worse than it was; when, alas, we have cause to seek out for every alleviation, great or small.

In acute torments, it is a very comfortable circumstance, if we can hope, that they will not be durable. Even a short time, indeed, will seem dreadfully long to us. But however, it must be a consolation in a storm, that we are making towards a safe harbour within our view, though we seem to approach it slowly. And as the easing of pain is not only ease but delight; we should support ourselves by expecting it, as well as enjoy it when it comes.

In tedious disorders it may be very useful to look back now and then, and see how much we have gone through already: not in order to load our minds with the burthen of it a second time; but to learn, from what we have done already, what we can do more, if need be. And probably, we shall be able to do it with less difficulty hereafter, than we did before. For by degrees and proper care, both our minds and bodies become habituated to endure hardship quietly and cheerfully. It is a great proof and instance of the mercy of our Creator, that we are so framed. And we ought to make a faithful use of his goodness in this respect, as well as others.

But in order to acquiesce more patiently under our sufferings, we should look beyond the bitterness to the possible benefits of them. Our liableness to them may teach us caution and prudence in many parts of our conduct, in order to avoid them; may preserve us from follies destructive to our fortunes, our reputations, our health itself. For numbers have presum-

ed

ed so far upon their strength, as utterly to destroy it by irregularities, while the happy necessity of being discreet in the management of themselves hath carried on many who were very infirm, comfortably enough, to a good old age. Therefore, on the whole, perhaps bodily complaints may prove a security against greater inconveniences: and, were these less; yet only the difference between the one evil and the others ought to be computed, as clear loss to us. Nor is it only from follies, that men are thus kept back, but frequently from sins also: from some, to which, if they would examine themselves, they might perceive they should have been exposed: and possibly from others, of which they have no suspicion. Firmness of constitution, vehemence of appetites and passions, flowing spirits, confidence of being able to do and to bear almost any thing, mislead men unaccountably in the conduct of life: make them forgetful of God and their latter end, prompt them to debauchery, intemperance, violence, injustice, to regard only present indulgence, and take the good things of this world for their portion. Better were it for such as resist not these temptations, if they had experienced in their stead the severest discipline of pain and sickness. These remind us of our dependence on him who made us; of the vanity of earthly enjoyments, of mortality and its consequences; of pitying and lessening the afflictions of our fellow-creatures; of shewing kindness, as we often need it. And the exercise of devotion towards God, and goodness to those around us, will so pleasingly employ our thoughts, so effectually sooth our minds, and reconcile us to ourselves and our condition, that we shall find the roughest attacks on our outward frame very supportable.

I shall only observe further under this head, that poverty and want, when they are so extreme as to bring on actual bodily sufferings, are to be placed to the account of pain: but such pain very seldom, if ever, arises to near the height which various diseases cause; and is much more constantly cured or mitigated by the care of charitable persons. Indigence, therefore, in this view, is very consistent with patience: and that in the other, of reflection and comparison, it is equally compatible with contentment, shall be shewn you hereafter.

2. The next source of impatience before mentioned is Sorrow: which sometimes is mere sympathy with the calamities of others. But this does not commonly rise to the height of impatience: much oftner we are impatient with the wretched
through

through our want of sympathy. There are those, however, who are made so uneasy by the distresses which they see, that they will not bear the uneasiness of attending to them enough to give them due assistance. Now this excessive tenderness is an unhappy infirmity. It argues indeed somewhat of a right disposition: but perverted to a quite different purpose from what nature meant. And we should moderate the passive feeling, in order to exert the requisite active goodness; nor would this, on trial, be found very difficult.

But our grief is usually for things happening, which we apprehend to be evils to ourselves: and they may be of various sorts. The more considerable are, unkindness or loss of friends, diminutions of fortune, disappointments in worldly views, imputations on our characters, consciousness of imprudent or sinful behaviour. All these may be needlessly aggravated by the voluntary workings of our own minds; and so far belong to the head of discontent: but much of the concern, which they give, is unavoidable, and relates to the present subject.

Unkindness, where we had peculiar reason to expect the contrary, is one of the bitterest afflictions of life. We should labour to prevent it, by chusing the objects both of our love and esteem with great caution; and restrain our affection towards them within due bounds; instead of letting it run, or perhaps forcing it, into romantic extremes, which must end in something wrong; and we should most attentively endeavour to give no cause of dislike and alienation. When it happens notwithstanding, that our most reasonable hopes are frustrated; change of opinion concerning the blameable party must naturally, if we are considerate, produce in us change of regard.

And we must comfort ourselves, that the fault is not on our side; take care to continue still equally unrepachable; apply our thoughts to the duties of such other connections and ties, as remain upon us after this is weakened or dissolved; raise our hearts more to him, who always makes a gracious return; and then no ingratitude or infidelity, which we can experience on earth, will be able to overwhelm us.

Concern for the loss of our friends by death, in itself a sore trial, is aggravated sometimes by a confused imagination, as if death were a misfortune to them: whereas, if they were good and virtuous, it is in truth the greatest possible gain. It can therefore be only ourselves, that we bemoan with justice: and the

the damage to us may be very considerable: for which reason we should be solicitous, both to make all the improvement by our friends, and shew all the kindness to them, that we can, whilst we have them; lest we should regret our negligence, when it is too late. But, though the common fault is underrating the value of those, who are near and ought to be dear to us, yet present grief on losing them may possibly overdo it; and we may find ourselves able to go on without them far more tolerably than we imagined. Necessity will put us on exerting our powers: we shall seek for other helps and other comforts; and in some degree at least, we shall find them. Or, supposing the accident to be as grievous, and as irreparable, as we apprehend it; yet this consolation is left, that the painful feeling of it will greatly diminish, however impossible we may at the time conceive that to be. Indeed, some appear unwilling that this should happen; and account it a duty to afflict themselves as much and as long as they can: whilst others go on to do it, though they profess to believe it a great sin. But, in reality, moderate concern, for a moderate season, is the useful dictate of nature: and immoderate concern is pardonable weakness; only it ought not to be wilfully indulged, wrought up to a great height and lengthened. Even if we affect to do these things, God has mercifully provided, in the unchangeable frame of our nature, that they shall have an end: and we should, instead of absurdly resisting him, co-operate with him by prudent reflection: not aim at insensibility; but only at such a rational degree of disengagement, as suits our condition; thus preparing by due behaviour under one stroke, to bear others which are to be expected. Persons on a journey quit many things, one after another, that are very agreeable to them; regret them all, but go forward however with composed minds. Now we are travellers through life: our friends are so too: our appointed stages are different: and we must learn to part.

Another cause of sorrow, loss of worldly substance, if it be so great as to bring an absolute painful want, hath been already considered: and if it doth no more than lower us in comparison with others, will be considered hereafter. But a few things may be observed here. We commonly urge it, as a great aggravation of our grief, if we not only are destitute of

the conveniences which wealthier persons enjoy, but have had them and known them, and been deprived of them. Now surely, on the whole, our condition is better for this, than if we had never had them, unless we make it worse by repining. Besides, when we had them, did they make us extremely happy? In all likelihood far from it. And why then should foregoing them make us extremely miserable? Or how happy forever we were before, why should we not now be as easy as we can? Why indeed should we not provide for such accidents, by living in the midst of plenty, as if we had less of it, and doing good with the remainder? This would be the best use of it, were we ever so sure of keeping the whole; but hath a singular advantage, if we are to lose part. For then we shall be able afterwards to afford ourselves, perhaps nearly, if not quite, as much as we did before: the poor and the public will be the sufferers: and our concern for them will, instead of a selfish, be a virtuous one, and probably seldom excessive.

Disappointments in other worldly matters, failure of obtaining rank, power, favour, or loss of them after they are obtained, require scarce any other considerations to alleviate them, than disappointments about wealth do. Only as it is yet more uncertain, whether they, who seek them, shall be able to acquire them; or they, who acquire them, to retain them; and indeed, whether they, who do both, shall be the better or the worse for them; there is less reason to set our hearts upon them, and afflict ourselves at crosses in relation to them.

But perhaps our grief is, that our character in the world is impaired: and this we cannot tell how to bear. Yet the case may be, that it had been raised too high; and now is reduced only to what it should be. Surely we may bear this: it will teach us to know ourselves, keep us from aiming in any respect at things above us, and do us good many ways. Or if others think too lowly of us, yet provided they impute nothing bad to us, we may still be very easy. We ourselves are ignorant of the worth of many: no wonder, if many be ignorant of ours. But supposing, that even downright ill is spoken of us; possibly it is because we have deserved just the contrary, because we have done our duty; and then what saith the scripture? That we have cause to be sorry and dejected? No. Suffering for conscience sake is the very case, of which our
Saviour

Saviour saith in the text, *In your patience possess ye your souls.* Elsewhere he saith more. *Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you—and say all manner of evil falsely against you, for my name's sake: rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven* *. Nay, he goes further still: *Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you* †. Not that a good reputation is in itself a blameable thing: but that when *all men*, particularly bad men, applaud any one highly, it is a ground for him to suspect himself of being too much *conformed to this world* ‡. Or, if we are not defamed for having acted wisely and well, yet perhaps it is for something indifferent, that we are misrepresented; and we cannot be fairly accused of acting foolishly or wickedly. In this case, if we have not merit, we have innocence, to support us. And a great support it is, had we none else. But there will always be some in the world to do us justice. And, by the assistance of their friendship, indeed sooner or later without it, time will bring truth to light.

But possibly we think our behaviour hath been imprudent; and we have brought our sufferings on ourselves; and this causes our sorrow. Yet possibly also we may charge ourselves, as persons under affliction often do, either unjustly, or however much too heavily. We did as well perhaps, as the abilities, which God hath given us, permitted: and if so, we are not to blame. But if we were imprudent, let us grow prudent now: not torment ourselves fruitlessly, which would be fresh folly, but labour composedly to retrieve our false steps, as far as we can.

But it may be we grieve, not for indiscretions merely, but for sins. And this grief should certainly be the heaviest, which is usually the lightest. Yet, though in most persons it very much wants to be increased; in some it needs to be restrained and regulated. Self-reflection was given us, not barely to make us uneasy, but, by so doing, to amend us. If it rises to a higher degree, than contributes to our amendment, it is undergoing so much misery to no use. And if we carry it so far as to obstruct our amendment, it is adding greatly to our former guilt. Excess of concern either for the weak or the wicked things that we have done, may sink us into desponden-

D 2

cy

* Matth. v. 11, 12.

† Luke vi. 26.

‡ Rom. xii. 2.

cy, may drive us to intemperance, may incite us to yet more desperate courses. Therefore we should by no means be impatient with ourselves: (for it is commonly a mark of pride: we cannot bear the imagination of having acted wrong:) but should humbly acknowledge our faults and infirmities, beg wisdom and strength from God's Holy Spirit for the sake of his blessed Son; and in the faith of that assistance, without which we can do nothing, meekly and perseveringly labour to do better. By this method we shall learn self-knowledge and watchfulness; improve by our very falls in skill to stand, recover our character amongst men, acquire a lively hope of acceptance with God, and be at peace within.

3. The next cause of impatience, mentioned before, was fear. Now fear supposes the evil apprehended to be at some distance: perhaps the distance is so great, that we need not yet provide against it: and why should we disquiet ourselves before the time? But admitting the danger to be nearer: though doubtless this passion was wisely and kindly implanted in us by our maker for precaution, yet we must keep it within bounds; else we shall be incapable of using effectual precaution; indeed shall contribute to bring on the very thing we dread. If we preserve our minds in a condition to take proper measures, it may never come near us; or though it do, may never fall upon us. Future bad events, as well as good, are extremely uncertain. Our pleasure is often diminished by the latter uncertainty. Why should not our uneasiness be calmed by the former? Have not we often seen others, have not we often been ourselves, grievously frightened with the prospect of what after all did not happen? let us oppose terror with hope. Or, if the agitation, produced by the conflict between the two, makes our case worse, as in some minds it seems to do; let us lay aside hope, and take it for granted that the misfortune we expect will befall us: yet it may continue a much less time than we expect. Or if not, it may however be much more tolerable. Fear is a strange magnifier. People say, they are positive, they are certain, that they shall never be able to go through what is approaching. They are not certain, they cannot be certain before-hand. Human nature will endure much more, than we imagine. At least, surely God can strengthen

us, if he will. And his word declares, *God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will, with the temptation also, make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it* *. Most men have found, and the timorous will own it, that they have frequently suffered a great deal more by the apprehension of heavy strokes, than by the infliction. Why should we not learn then to moderate our apprehensions? Look steadily at the thing feared: examine the worst of it: but observe also the mitigations and remedies, and apply them. They are various in themselves, and useful in various degrees, according to the difference of circumstances: and the particulars cannot be reckoned up here. Only, do nothing wicked by way of prevention; for sin is worse than any temporal suffering. Set not your thoughts wholly on guarding against one danger; for there are many: nor against them all; for your attention ought to be divided amongst the several duties of life, that none may be neglected. Want not to be securer, than the state, in which we live, will allow: but let it suffice you, that the world is governed by the providence of God. Pray to him, and cheerfully put your interests into his hands, and all will end well. *Be not afraid of sudden fear—when it cometh: for the Lord shall be thy confidence, and shall keep thy foot from being taken* †. *The fear of the wicked shall come upon him: but the desire of the righteous shall be granted* ‡. *The fear of man bringeth a snare; but whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe* §.

These assurances hold good more especially with respect to one fear, that of death, which deserves to be mentioned separately. We should always live in the thought of it: but many live in the dread also; and dread it on occasions where there is not even the smallest hazard of it. And sometimes their very alarms, sometimes the useless and hurtful precautions, which they take in consequence of them, hasten it. These things are evidently in a high degree unwise: and a moderate use of reason, one should think, might check them. But be we ever so prudent, it will come. And numbers are terrified with the great pain, which they fancy it must bring with it. But this, as far as ever we have room to judge from appearances, is quite a groundless imagination: and there are very
few

* 1 Cor. x. 13.

† Prov. iii. 25, 26.

‡ Prov. x. 24.

§ Prov. xxix. 25.

few who have not undergone, perhaps many times over, more bodily sufferings already, than they will in the hour of their dissolution. Still, were death to end our being, the view of it to good persons would be a melancholy one indeed. But, God be thanked, *our Saviour Jesus Christ hath abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel* *. Impenitent sinners, I own, instead of comfort, have only cause from hence for unspeakably worse terror. And strong warnings of it are kindly given them in holy writ. *Be not afraid of them, that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom you shall fear: Fear him, who, after he hath killed, hath power to cast into hell: yea, I say unto you, fear him* †. Nor is there, in the whole creation, any cure for this fear, but repentance and faith, and christian obedience to God's laws: and these are a perfect cure. For our blessed redeemer hath condescended to die, that they who believe in him and keep his commandments may live in happiness for ever: or, to express it in the words of scripture, *that, through death, he might destroy him, that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them, who, through fear of death, were all their life-time subject to bondage* ‡.

4. The last trial of our patience, of which I proposed to speak, is anger. With ourselves we are seldom angry enough, when we do amiss: and yet we may be too angry at our own faults, as well as too much grieved for them. Of this latter excess I treated under the second head: and the observations and directions, there laid down, may without difficulty be applied here. I shall now, therefore, discourse only of anger against others: and that more briefly, because I have lately treated that subject at large. Take notice then of the following motives for moderating this passion. Impatience of pain, excess of sorrow and fear, hurt only or chiefly ourselves, with whom we have the best right to make free; and seldom provoke any one else to do us harm: but excess of anger injures others, which is a great sin; and excites them to revenge, which is a great folly in us. We have surely failings and sufferings enough besides; and need not add to them thus. But indeed, without looking so far, anger in its very nature is tormenting: and, when immoderate or frequent, sours our tempers,

* 2 Tim. i. 10.

† Luke xii. 4, 5.

‡ Heb. ii. 14, 15.

pers, embitters our lives, wears out our frame, lowers our character, lessens our influence, thwarts our interests, multiplies our difficulties, hurries us into dangers, even of our lives, in more ways than one. Plainly therefore we are concerned, on many accounts, to restrain it within the limits of reason and religion, by every method in our power: by serious considerations of duty to him, who requires it of us, and of gratitude to him, who is so patient and long-suffering towards us; by cultivating good-will to our fellow-creatures, by reflecting on the frailty of human nature, on our own innumerable frailties and errors, in behaviour to others; which we doubtless must wish to have gently passed over by them; and therefore ought to be gentle ourselves. We should endeavour by prudent and mild treatment of those with whom we are concerned, by discreet vigilance over them, by friendly instructions and admonitions given them, to prevent their acting wrongly by us: and, if they do, notwithstanding, we should consider calmly, and without exaggeration, the degree of the fault committed, hear and weigh their defences and excuses, make use of cool expostulations to convince and reform them; and employ others in this good work, who may be more likely to do it well and successfully, if we have any cause to distrust our own temper or weight. And amongst other things we should frequently recollect, how happy and pleased with ourselves we have been afterwards, when we have resisted and overcome incitements to unreasonable rage, and how miserable and full of fruitless remorse, when we have yielded to them.

But besides the directions more peculiarly appropriated to each of the four temptations to be impatient, which I have mentioned, there are some scarcely touched upon yet, which in a good measure belong to them all. One is, to think often how possible it is, that more or fewer of these temptations may sooner or later come to our share. Were we indeed to imagine it more probable than it is, that many of them would, this might sink our spirits, and weaken our strength; our *hearts failing us for fear, and for looking after those things, which perhaps are not coming* *. But previously considering in a reasonable manner, to what sort of accidents we are liable, will
guard

* Luke xxi. 26.

guard us against the vain imagination of being exempt from evil, prevent us from being alarmed, surprised, and cast down by it, *as though some strange thing happened unto us* *, and gradually reconcile us to the lot of humanity: we shall be ready and prepared for whatever may fall out; recollect immediately, that no trial hath overtaken us, *but such as is common to men* †; and *resist* all emotions of immoderate vehemence, *knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in our brethren that are in the world* ‡. Another direction is, that under a long continuance of pain or grief, or fear, or provocations to anger, if we find that by the mere use of arguments from prudence, virtue, or religion, we cannot get the better of them, but are in danger of being overcome; we should try the effect of turning our attention from them for the present, as well as we are able, to other subjects: undoubtedly to the best and most valuable that we can; but to any, that are innocent, rather than grow fretful or despond. Only we must never take refuge in trifles out of choice; but consider it as a mark of weakness, and cause of shame, that we are driven to them: and we must beware, that they never banish pious and serious thoughts out of our minds, or depreciate them in our esteem.

Every one of these rules, I trust, may assist us, more or less, *to run with patience the race that is set before us* §, as the apostle exhorts. But the great assistance will be what in the next words he directs, *Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross—and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God* ¶. His first disciples were enabled to bear pain, sorrow, fear, provocation, each of them in the highest degree, from their cruel persecutors, by *considering him, that endured such contradiction of sinners, lest they should be wearied and faint in their minds* **. Well then may we, who have so much less to undergo, *possess our souls in patience* amidst it all. Indeed, without patience we cannot, in the lowest sense; *possess our souls*; be masters of ourselves, and enjoy even in the present being, which God hath given us; the best things will be tasteless, most things bitter; we shall torment ourselves, and repine against him. But if we watch over our hearts, and apply to God, he will *strengthen us with*

all

* 1 Pet. iv. 12.

§ Heb. xii. 1.

† 1 Cor. x. 13.

¶ Ver. 2.

‡ 1 Pet. v. 9.

** Ver. 2.

all might according to his glorious power, unto all patience and long suffering with joyfulness : Tribulation will work patience ; and patience, experience ; and experience, hope ; and hope will not make us ashamed†. For not only shall we possess our souls in comfort here, but if, as St. James enjoins, we let patience have her perfect work‡, we shall secure the possession of endless felicity hereafter. For God will give to them, who by patient continuance in well-doing seek for glory, and honour, and immortality, eternal life§. Therefore, having heard the Word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience¶ : and the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and the patient waiting for Christ **. For ye have need of patience, that after ye have done the will of God, ye may receive the promise ††.*

* Col. i. 11.

† Rom. v. 3, 4, 5.

‡ Jam. i. 4.

§ Rom. ii. 7.

¶ Luke viii. 15.

** 2 Thess. iii. 5.

†† Heb. x. 36.

SERMON IV.

ON CONTENTMENT.

PHIL. iv. 11.

—I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.

YOU have lately been exhorted to the duty of patience: which consists in bearing well such things, as immediately and necessarily give uneasiness: and now I proceed to that of contentment under such, as disturb us only on reflection and comparison. One should think, that they who need not suffer any thing, would not; yet very often such, as feel no positive evil, that is worth naming, are very far from being at ease. Multitudes are dissatisfied, and some extremely miserable, with very little other cause for it, than the unreasonable workings of their own minds. Instead of contriving to be as happy as they can in their condition, which is plainly the wise part, they set themselves to find out, why they should be wretched in it, and accordingly become so. Were they only to desire with moderation any proper good thing, which they have not, or endeavour with moderation to obtain it, this would be always void of blame, often worthy of praise: they would be pleased, perhaps improved also, if they succeeded; and composed, though they failed. But vain man extends his wishes and his claims far beyond these bounds: and will enjoy no peace within, because he is not, in this or that respect, what he might have been, or what others are.

But suppose he were all that he wishes, how doth he know, that he should not quickly wish for more, with the same tormenting eagerness, or that his wishes would ever end? For there would be just the same ground for new ones. His complaint at present is, not that he positively suffers any thing, but

but that he wants something. Now something is, and must be always wanting to finite beings, be they raised ever so high: else they would be infinite. The fallen angels were unspeakably above human rank; yet they felt a deficiency, and absurdly repined at it: Heaven was not good enough for them, and so they were cast down to hell. Men imagine, that were they but in such or such a state, they should never be tempted to think of any thing more. But this is only a sign, that they do not know themselves. In proportion as their situation was raised, their prospect would be enlarged: and they would long to be masters of all within their view. Success would encourage them to hope for greater success yet: and besides, they would be disappointed in the felicity they promised themselves from what they have got; but instead of learning from thence, in what real felicity lies, would go on to seek for it in something else: and be at least as remote from it as they were before. We see this perpetually, or with the smallest attention may see it, in the case of others: and it is astonishing partiality, that we cannot believe it would be our own. Nay, perhaps we see it is our own case, as far as we have advanced hitherto: and yet are weak enough to imagine it would be quite otherwise, could we but advance a few steps more: whereas in truth, he that is uneasy merely because he hath not all he would, never will be easy till he grows wiser.

Happily we none of us disquiet ourselves, about every thing that we have not. If we did, how blameable and how pitiable should we be! We all know numbers of things, that we should be very glad of, and yet can bear the want of them very well: and why not the want of others as well? What is impossible, it would be madness to covet. What we cannot obtain, is the same in relation to us, as if it were impossible in itself. Therefore we should never think of it. And what is very unlikely to be got, should scarcely be more minded, than if we knew that absolutely we could not get it. But you will say, how shall we put these things out of our minds? Turn them to something else. Recollect the comforts that you have, and rejoice in them. All of us have many such. Reasonably good health, wholesome food and refreshing sleep, a provision of the other necessities of life, a share of its conveniences, acquaintance that are agreeable

to us, friends that wish us well, and, upon occasion, would shew it, opportunities of easy and chearful conversation, the good opinion and esteem of those about us, the very sight of the sun and the view of the face of nature, are things, every one of them designed and fitted to give us pleasure, if we would but be so kind to ourselves as to take it. Consciouſness, that through the grace of God's holy spirit we mean, and on the whole behave well, persuasion that, through the merits of his blessed Son, we are interested in his favour, hopes that his fatherly providence will watch over us here, and his goodness make us perfectly happy hereafter, these are blessings of a higher order, which we all may have; and as no one ought to be, or with reason can be, content without them, so every one surely may well be content with them; and think himself enough distinguished by such mercies, let him have ever so few advantages besides. And we should accustom ourselves to look, more than we do, on the bright side of our condition; not in order to grow vain and contemptuous upon it, which is the common use that is made of contemplating it, but to enjoy it with humble complacency. We should place a just value on all our greater comforts: and fetch out of the very least as much as they will afford us. Applying our minds to become easy and satisfied is evidently right: but why should we reason ourselves into being miserable, and resolve not to be the better for any thing, because we have not this or that?

Perhaps indeed you will allow, that grieving merely because you are not possessed of things, that are plainly above you, is very blameable; and will alledge, that you are not guilty of it; that you are willing to be inferior both to what you might have been, and to what many others are. But still you will plead, that such and such have no title to pre-eminence over you, or even equality with you: yet they have obtained it, and that you cannot bear. Now consider; these very persons, who give you dissatisfaction and envy, if you knew all, you might see cause to pity. You know not how little delight they may have in all their seeming advantages; or what sufferings they may on one account or another undergo; nay, how dearly they may pay for what you imagine to be a principal part of their felicity. For usually there are great deductions to be made from all appearances of prosperity amongst men; and often they, whose outward shew is most admired

admired, are the most wretched within. Indeed, though doubtless there are many, with whom you would wish to change some things, there are few, if any, with whom you would consent to an entire change; and take their person, their age, their health, their temper, their situation, their employment, their connections, their vexations, their hazards, their circumstances of all kinds, for yours. And if you scarce know, with whose condition, upon the whole, you would be better pleased; why are you not pleased with your own? For surely, it would be too unreasonable to desire, that you should pick and chuse from each only what you like, and unite it all in yourself.

But further, your condition is just what it is, let that of others be what it will: supposing they enjoy more, or suffer less, than you; still your enjoyments and sufferings are just the same, as if this were quite the reverse. And why do you set yourself to think the contrary, and disquiet yourself with a false imagination? There will, and there must be inequalities in the world. Nothing can prevent it, but continual miracles: and if it were prevented and we were all on a level, we should probably, on the whole, have great cause to be sorry. Think then: why is it harder, that you should be inferior to others, than that they should be inferior to you? Would your state be ever the better, if theirs were made worse? Would you wish theirs to be worse, that you might have comfort in the comparison: If you would, yours is already much better than you deserve. Impatience and excessive agitation, under great pain, sorrow, fear, provocation, is at some times, and in some degree, hardly possible to be avoided, and therefore excusable. But the discontent of those, who have no such evils to complain of, is of their own choice: they might be easy if they would. And resolving not to be so, because they imagine others are more so than they, is not only unreasonable, but ill-will and malice. The torment, which they feel, is a guilty one: it punishes them justly here; and they will be liable, for indulging so unchristian, so inhuman, a temper, instead of *rejoicing with them that rejoice**, to far severer punishments hereafter.

But you will say perhaps, that your inferiority in this or that

* Rom. xii. 15.

that particular makes you despised: and who can bear contempt? But indeed scarce any one is despised for being what he is, and cannot help being, but only for affecting to be what he should not or cannot be. The lowest in all respects may be useful; and if they behave properly, will be valued according to their usefulness. At least they can never deserve contempt: and the consciousness that they do not, will enable them to slight and overlook the little they may meet with: and indeed often to despise those who despise them. For worldly advantages only serve to lessen the esteem of such as use them ill: and some of the greatest, and, in their own and the vulgar opinion, the most accomplished, are often the farthest of all people from being truly respectable.

But probably you will plead further, that the persons, who excite your dissatisfaction, are vicious, or at least unworthy of their pre-eminences: and they will do harm with them, or however, little or no good. Now, in all likelihood you think them worse, or less worthy than they are: they may have good qualities with their faults, though you are unwilling to see them; and you certainly have faults with your good qualities, though you are desirous to overlook them: and how much better you are upon the whole than they, it may perhaps be neither easy nor safe for you to judge. But be they ever so bad, providence may over-rule them, and keep them from executing their bad purposes, or may use them for its instruments, to correct the faults of others, that are as bad, or exercise the virtues of others, who are much better; possibly to correct and exercise you. Therefore do not fail under the trial. But is this fear of their doing harm the real motive of your discontent, or only an excuse for it to others and yourself?

You will probably reply, that however that be, had you had such and such advantages, which you have not, you would have done a great deal of good. But perhaps others will do it in your stead: and you may if you will, and you certainly should, take pleasure in it, by whomsoever done, and not repine at it. But it may be you would not have been able to do the good you fancy, and would only have brought disquiet on yourself by attempting it. Nay, it may be, you would not have attempted it: for difference of circumstances makes a great difference in the ways of thinking of the same persons; and

and we often do not prove to be what we fully imagined we should.

Still, at least, you will say, what you wish for would make you very happy : and therefore you regret the want of it. But regret it as little as possible, and be as happy as you can without it. Perhaps you would be scarcely, perhaps not at all, happier than you are. Multitudes find this to be true every day : they obtain what they desire ; and very soon after, if not instantly, perceive that their condition is never the better for it. But they are thought happy, you will say, and admired or envied : and that alone is a desirable thing. Now surely it is very poor comfort, indeed it is rather an aggravation of sorrow, when we feel our condition wretched or insipid, to have it thought joyful and desirable : to be congratulated on our situation, when we know it is a subject of condolence ; and so to have pity from none, but the ill will of many, to load us with more uneasiness, when we inwardly groan under too much already. The wise king saith, *Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous : but who can stand before envy* * ? Our desire of producing it in others is immoral ; for it is a desire of giving them pain : and the imprudence fully equals the guilt. For all pre-eminences, especially when accompanied with ostentation of them, or too visible complacency in them, to which all who have them are extremely subject, stir up malignity in the observers of them : who often find means to make those very miserable, whom they would have let alone, and suffered to go on quietly, if they had not been provoked by thinking them over-happy.

But supposing the advantages, which you pine for, whatever they be, would raise no malice against you, but only admiration of you : how often hath that, nay even the shadow of it, mere flattery, made persons vain and indiscreet, misled them into great errors, and plunged them into grievous misery !

Indeed, without either, all sorts of superiority carry their dangers along with them. If you were placed in a higher station, perhaps you would be at a loss how to behave in it ; for there are many difficulties in all such ; you would be found by others, you would find yourself, in one respect or another, unequal to it : or if not, it might tempt you to pride and abuse
of

* Prov. xxvii. 4.

of power. If you were possessed of great wealth, it might lead you, for it hath led many, either to endless desires of still more; or to expensiveness and thoughtless extravagance, that would end in distress; or to sensuality and vicious indulgences, or to contemptible indolence and uselessness. Accomplishments of person expose the possessors of them to immoderate self-esteem, to neglect of useful attainments, to dissipation of their time, often in the unfittest company, to improper freedoms, to great hazards of their reputation and their innocence. Health and strength encourage men to venture upon irregularities, that prove ruinous to both, and to their fortunes at the same time; whilst they, whom infirmity obliges to be careful, prolong their days in comfort. Strength of genius, and extent of knowledge, often bewilder persons in fruitless researches, or prompt them to dangerous and hurtful singularities of opinion: Quickness of parts, and agreeableness in conversation, frequently betray them into grievous imprudences of various kinds, contrary to their own interest, to the peace of those around them, to piety, morals, and common decency.

But whatever may happen to others, you think you should enjoy all the benefits of these pre-eminences, and avoid all the evils incident to them. But why do you think so? You are just of the same make with the rest of mankind, and liable to all their frailties. Your confidence in yourself is a mark, not of ability, but of weakness and ignorance in a point of the greatest consequence. If you were but humbler, you would be much safer: and one material source of safety would be content. For discontent brings people into mischiefs innumerable. It is a painful state in itself: preys upon the spirits, deadens the sense of every enjoyment in life, sours the temper, and produces great wickedness, as well as misery.

Displeasure with their own condition tempts many to aim at bettering it unlawfully, by force or fraud: and dreadful must the uneasiness be, which can drive them to a method of relief, so evidently criminal. For however some may pretend they cannot see what right others have to enjoy so much more of the world than themselves; yet let but any one, who hath less enjoyment of it, apply this reasoning to them, and act upon it, then they can perceive exceeding plainly, that his dislike of his own circumstances in any respect, is no manner of reason, or excuse, for his using other than honest means to mend them.

them. For why should their property, their character, their quiet, suffer, because he is uneasy? And yet, what dreadful havock is there often made of all these from no better a motive! The kings and princes of the earth ravage nations, murder and distress millions; the powerful and wealthy, of lower degree, oppress and injure their fellow-creatures in more ways, than can be reckoned up, merely to obtain advantages, perhaps to which they have no title, certainly which they of all men least need, solely because they cannot rest without them; though at the same time they have no satisfaction, worth naming, from them. And in lower life, what numbers are there, who disturb their neighbours, to a great extent sometimes, and put things in a ferment all around them, only to carry some point, which possibly they ought not to carry, or which is of little use to them; nay, it may be, only to grieve some innocent object of their resentment, or to find any employment, rather than none, which may divert for a time, the inward chagrin that devours them! So baneful are the fruits of discontent.

But when it is not carried so far, it is often very blameable: as when it incites men to importune and teize others for favours, to which they have no sufficient pretensions; which is giving them trouble, sometimes a great deal, without any right to do it. And then the next step usually is, complaining, and being angry, and wanting to be revenged on such, as have not done every thing for us that we wanted; though possibly they have done more than we care to own; or they know or find they cannot do what we wish, or are no way obliged to it, or have obligations to the contrary; as they easily may, of more kinds than one.

But even supposing we strive to keep our discontent to ourselves, yet if it rise within us to envy against others, this is a great sin. Barely indeed feeling our own disadvantages or disappointments, the more strongly on the view of another person's pre-eminence or success, is hardly avoidable, and may be nearly or quite innocent. Wishing our own condition were as good, as we take his to be, is not wishing ill to him, but only well to ourselves. But if we grieve, not that we do not enjoy what we would, but that he doth; or secretly rejoice in the sight, or the thought of any misfortune, that may bring him down lower and nearer to us: not only we shall be tempted to do ill, if we can, to one whom we wish ill to; but the wish it-

self is malice, unprovoked by any injury, (for his superiority to us is no injury;) the directly contrary disposition to that love and good will, which is, under all provocations, the great precept of humanity and of the gospel.

Nay further, though we feel no malevolence at all against any one else, yet if the comparative disadvantages of our condition fill us with emotion and inward agitation, we are still in a wrong state of mind. It may seem perhaps, that our desire of any thing, apprehended to be good, must be strong, in proportion as we apprehend it to be a great good. But in reality, we have no desire at all for things that are quite above us; partly, to be sure, because we have no distinct notions of them; but partly also, because we look on them as not belonging to us. Now would we but consider whatever we certainly cannot have, in the same light, and whatever we probably cannot have, in nearly the same, it would save us great uneasiness and guilt. The condition of many, who are much discontented about it, is in truth almost as good as this world admits; for it doth not admit any high happiness: and what can they get then by disquieting themselves that it is not better? Moderate desires will excite reasonable endeavours to mend it, if there appears room: and immoderate ones will only add vexation. Sometimes the vehemence of our pursuit is the very cause that we miss our aim. And were it always the likeliest way to success, yet when disappointments happen, as they will frequently happen, it must aggravate the sorrow of them very greatly. Nay, mere delays may give eager spirits much more pain before they attain their ends, than the attainment will ever give them pleasure afterwards. For every one experiences what yet no one will believe, against the next time, that the largest increase of worldly advantages is commonly little or no increase, but often a diminution, of self-enjoyment: though indeed were this otherwise, bringing down our wishes to reason is so much the surer and more practicable method of being easy, than bringing every thing to yield to our wishes, that it scarce needs the further recommendation of being the more virtuous method also.

Still, paying some attention to our worldly interests, is a requisite part of wisdom: and it may be very blameable, not to stretch out our hand and take what providence offers. But to covet with earnestness, and pursue with impetuosity, an object
that

that seems to fly from us, when God alone knows what it may prove, if we should overtake it, is generally, if not universally, presumptuous and rash. Yet this is the course that we commonly take. Whatever we see others follow, we follow too, just as fast, without asking ourselves why; encourage our wild fancies, instead of checking them; fill our hearts with imaginary wants, and become as eager for multitudes of things one after another, all which we might do very well without, as if the whole felicity of our being consisted in them. If men allow themselves in such behaviour, all that success can do for them, is to engage them still deeper in the same folly. For these cravings have no end, and therefore should be curbed and quieted in the beginning.

But though men are not vehemently agitated by discontent, yet if they are dejected and sunk by it, mourn over the disadvantages of their condition, and live in a state of affliction, be it ever so calm affliction, on account of them, even this is by no means right. It may indeed sometimes be in a great measure, mere bodily disease: or it may, when the degree of it is low, be the fault of one, who is, on the whole, virtuous and good. But still it shews an undue attachment to this world, yet unfit persons at the same time both for the comforts to be enjoyed, and the duties to be done in it. If indulged to any considerable length, it may disorder not only the temper, but the understanding. And to strange lengths it sometimes runs in people, of whom one must think, that if they have cause to lament, it is hard to say, who hath cause to be satisfied.

Or suppose the various disadvantages of men to be as great as they think them; yet happiness doth not arise from outward circumstances, or the accomplishments usually admired: else how unspeakably happy would the rich and great, the learned and ingenious, the beautiful and gay be, who all, at times, confess themselves to be far from it; and how miserable the rest of mankind, who, God be thanked, relish their being very comfortably! Every state hath not only its inconveniences, but its consolations: and the discontented would see this, if they did not perversely look solely at the former in their own case, and the latter in that of others: magnify what they themselves want, and under-rate what they have; over-value what their neighbours enjoy, and forget to make allowance for what perhaps they suffer. We know the worst of

the condition we are in : but what evils belong to that which we wish to be in, we know not. Besides, every one cannot have every thing, that he desires : and where is the greater hardship, that we should fail of it, than that others should ? Many appear or succeed better, it may be : but many also not near so well. Would they have cause to be wretched, were they in our circumstances ? If not, why have we ?

But further yet : perhaps our disadvantages proceed from ourselves : possibly it is our virtue and our honour that keeps us back from what we long for : and surely, the possession of good qualities ought to give us more pleasure, than any disappointments owing to them should give us pain. Or possibly some fault of ours produces what we complain of : our negligence or expensiveness brings us into straits, our imprudences create us difficulties, our ill temper makes things uneasy round us, our irregularities impair our health and spirits : correct these errors, instead of repining at their consequences, and all will be well.

It may be you will say indeed, that you have endeavoured to correct your faults, but without success ; and your chief discontent is at yourselves. Now if this be really your case, it is a very uncommon one. Many are dissatisfied with other persons and things, some with almost all about them ; but few with their own temper and conduct. Such as really take pains to amend it, deserve great esteem ; and, when they find the work peculiarly difficult, as they often may, especially after long indulgence, great pity likewise. But though they should never be so far contented with themselves, as to cease from the attempt of reformation, yet, while they are sure they attempt it in earnest, they should acquiesce very calmly, notwithstanding that their progress is but slow. The nature of all men is both imperfect and corrupt : and that of some much more than of others. The disparity of the faculties of our minds and the dispositions of our hearts is as great, as of our bodily qualifications or external circumstances : and every one must submit to his lot in the former, as well as the latter ; for grieving and murmuring will make nothing better in either. Those creatures, which cannot at all improve themselves, appear to be content with being what they are : but we can improve ourselves greatly ; and if we labour to do it chiefly in what best deserves our labour, goodness and virtue, we shall out of weak-
ness

ness be made strong *, provided we trust not presumptuously to our own efforts, but humbly join with them, faith in God, and prayer for the aid of his holy spirit, through the mediation of Jesus Christ: for *his grace shall be sufficient for us, and his strength made perfect in our weakness* †. *Without him we can do nothing* ‡: every wrong inclination, dissatisfaction amongst others with every thing within and without, in their turns will prevail over us: but *through Christ who strengtheneth us, we can do all things* §. To him we owe our deliverance *from the wrath to come* ¶: and well may we be easy with an inferior share of worldly advantages; for the best of us deserve none. From him proceeds all the good, that we think or do: and surely we have no title to greater abilities in any respect, than he bestows on us. On him depend our hopes of future happiness: and the lowest place in it is too high for us. Yet we know not how far we may advance in spiritual attainments by modest perseverance. We may be enabled in time to out-do both ourselves and others, and be rewarded accordingly. But however that proves, it may abundantly suffice us all, that we shall *make our calling and election sure* ||, and *enter into some degree of the joy of our Lord* **, in return for our faithful improvement of the talents committed to us, be they more or fewer, if *in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, we keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience* ††, though it be in very different proportions, *some an hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty* ‡‡.

* Heb. xi. 34.

§ Phil. iv. 13.

** Matth. xxv. 21.

† 2 Cor. xii. 9.

¶ Matth. iii. 7.

†† Luke viii. 15.

‡ John xv. 5.

|| 2 Pet. i. 10.

‡‡ Matth. xiii. 8.

S E R M O N V.

ON RESIGNATION.

PSALM xxxix. 10.

I became dumb, and opened not my mouth: for it was thy doing.

IT would be our wisdom and our duty, though we had no knowledge of religion, to bear the sufferings of life with patience, and submit to the inequalities of it with contentment. I have therefore hitherto inforced upon you the practice of these two virtues, chiefly from prudential and moral considerations, though I could not altogether forbear adding some inducements of piety also. But these last are both so superior to the former, and so necessary in human circumstances, that I must now dwell upon them distinctly.

Pains of the body, and uneasiness of the mind, may sometimes be so grievous, that, had we no invisible sovereign to obey, and nothing to hope or fear after death, it would be hard to persuade ourselves to continue in life. At least we should undergo in it a great deal of misery, with few and poor consolations. Those indeed, which I have mentioned to you, are in many cases of considerable use by themselves: in all cases they may be of service, when combined with reflections of a higher nature. And our groveling minds are often more affected with feeble reasons, that are level to them; than with strong ones, that seem above them: or however may best be quieted a while by a previous use of the former, till they can be raised to an ability of applying the latter. And humanity requires, that even the weakest aid be called in: but at the same time, that the principle stress be laid on the firmest support: else what will be the consequence? Only indeed what most of us in our turns have probably experienced. We have been told that grieving would not help us, without being told what

what would ; and so have been left to grieve on. We have been told, that sooner or later our sufferings would abate, which is small satisfaction in the mean while ; or that they would be short, because our lives are so, which is leaving us to be miserable, as long as we are any thing. We have been told perhaps, that pain is no evil, and virtue is its own reward in all circumstances, when we were actually feeling the contrary : or that others were as wretched as we, or even more so ; as if that could make our wretchedness cease. We have been bid to turn our thoughts from our sorrows to amusement ; when we could not, if we would ; and possibly should have abhorred to do it, if we could. Sage maxims and counsels of various and contradictory sorts, have been urged upon us, which had no authority or weight to make their way into our hearts : but we have remained in the condition, which poor *Job* expresses to his friends : *I have heard many such things : miserable comforters are ye all* *. Or though men have ever so few sufferings, yet, without religious views, they may have so few enjoyments, and those so low, that a rational soul must disdain them, and feel its existence to be insipid and unsatisfactory. Or, however content, upon force, to acquiesce after a sort in our own condition, we may still either be persuaded, that the general state of things upon the whole is wrong and unhappy, or doubt so greatly whether it be right and good, that the world may appear very gloomy and comfortless to a benevolent mind.

If therefore we desire to pass through it with complacency, we must extend our thoughts further, like the psalmist in the text ; and consider ourselves, as in the hands of God : for then, whatever happens, or whatever is wanting, to us or to any one, we shall see cause to submit to it, composedly and placidly, without objecting. *I became dumb, and opened not my mouth : for it was thy doing.*

The Creator of all things is evidently, as such, Lord of all things : and hath a right to place us in what station, and expose us to what accidents he pleases ; provided the being, which he hath given us, be not, on the whole, without our fault, worse than not being. For *who art thou, O man, that repliest against God ? shall the thing formed say unto him that formed it, why hast thou made me thus † ? Is it not lawfull*
for

* Job xvi. 2.

† Rom. ix. 23.

for him to do what he will with his own*? He can have no need, no temptation to use us unjustly: and, without any, we never use one another so: which knowledge alone is enough to produce in us a considerable degree of dutiful submission. If what we dislike in our condition were the effect of mere chance or fatal necessity, we might rebel in our hearts against it. But a principle of yielding to the lawful authority of an almighty ruler is part of human nature. Our circumstances perhaps are disadvantageous, or even our sufferings great. But if we look diligently into our temper and behaviour, have we not deserved all that we undergo, have we not deserved much worse? And if so, surely we should say in our hearts, with poor penitent *Eli*, *It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth to him good*†: and with *Jeremiah*, *wherefore doth a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins? Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord*‡. Perhaps also, the uneasiness, which we feel, whether inflicted for our transgressions or not, is more than overbalanced by the comforts that we enjoy. Our impatience may lead us into great mistakes in this matter: but God is liable to none. Or if, at present, wretchedness preponderates, he can easily make us a compensation, either here or hereafter: nay, if justice requires it, he certainly will. And it is good, that a man should both hope, and quietly wait for the salvation of the lord§. In the midst of heathen darkness indeed, there may to some have seemed cause of doubt, especially on trying occasions, whether the administration of things were just or not; and, supposing it to be so on the whole, whether it was or could be so in regard of each particular person. Now these, the more love and zeal they had for what was right, the more they must be dissatisfied with what appeared to be wrong: and therefore might be excusable in a degree, if they murmured against the dispensations of providence towards themselves, or others. Some again, impatient of the evils of this life, ignorant of the means of procuring strength to bear them, and perhaps also doubtful at best of another to reward them, might, without any heinous depravity, yield to the temptation of thinking themselves allowed or even called, by the author of their beings, to put a voluntary end to them, whenever they were oppressed by sufferings hard to support. But in the clearer light of our days, either of these dispositions would be unspeakably more criminal.

Yet,

* Matth. xx. 15. † 1 Sam. iii. 18. ‡ Lam. iii. 39. 40. § Lam. iii. 26.

Yet, were we only to believe, that God will do us no wrong, our submission to his will, though it might well be full of the profoundest reverence, would not be accompanied with the highest degree of esteem. But happily he hath also shewn us great kindness. For every pleasure that we enjoy, every capacity of receiving pleasure that belongs to our inward or outward frame, proceeds from his bounty. And how do we commonly behave upon it? Yield ourselves up to his disposal with a chearful trust in him? No: repine and complain, that he hath not done more for us, or that he doth not continue to us all that we ever had. But every thing is more than we are intitled to. We have no property in any thing: we ourselves are his property. Our very being is not our own: He bestowed it, and whatever we possess in it, and that only during his pleasure: he may allow us as few comforts, or mix with them as many afflictions as he will. *Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil**? All that he granted, he may withdraw at any time: and our concern is only to say with *Job*, *the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord†*. He might have made any one of us the very lowest of his creation: and if the meanest of the works of his hands hath a claim to more than he hath vouchsafed, it hath an equal claim to more without end: and if it is not bound to resignation at present, can never be bound to it in any situation at all.

But though the sovereignty of God is absolute, we know not that he ever uses it in an arbitrary manner. The scripture tells us in express terms, that he *doth not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men‡*. And to think, that he limits the happiness of the least happy of his creatures without cause, would be entertaining a disrespectful notion of his glorious attributes. *Manifold as his works are, yet in wisdom hath he made them all§*: and *the earth is full of the goodness of the Lord¶*. The farther men see into whatever he hath done or appointed, the more evidence they discern of foresight and skill, of bounty and mercy: and therefore ought firmly to believe they take place, even where they see them not. Such and such things we are apt to imagine might have been contrived more for our particular advantage. Yet perhaps we mistake:

VOL. I.

G

and

* Job ii. 10.

† Job i. 21.

‡ Lam. iii. 33.

§ Psal. civ. 24.

¶ Psal. xxxiii. 5.

and what we wish either could not have been at all, (for many things may be impossible, which we do not perceive to be so) or would not have been the better for us. Our insight into consequences reaches but a very little way. In multitudes of cases we are full as ignorant of what would be for our benefit, as children are of what would be for theirs: and ought therefore to acquiesce in the will and the knowledge of our heavenly Father, as we expect them to acquiesce in ours.

But supposing that granting every one of our desires would be an act of kindness to us; yet *the Lord is good to all, and his tender mercies are over all his works* *. Very often it is visible, that, if we succeed in our wishes, others must fail in theirs: were we to have this or that advantage, they must be under proportionable disadvantages. And why is it not as consistent with the wisdom and the goodness of God to regard their interests, as ours? Perhaps we deserve it no better, perhaps not so well. Or if we did, or if it appeared not who would be hurt by greater indulgence to us, it doth not follow, that no one would; and that no inconvenience to any part, or in any respect, would arise from it. In this wide world the connections of things are innumerable: and may be very important, where they are absolutely hidden from our view, who probably discern but an inconsiderable portion of them. Subordinations are necessary in every system of every kind. The low rank and helplessness of many creatures fits them for our use; our advantages proceed from their sufferings; from the very sufferings which we inflict on them; yet they are totally ignorant of this: and how know we what advantages may, some way, though quite different and quite inconceivable to us, proceed from our low rank and our sufferings? And as God hath wisely and kindly made so many orders of beings beneath us; why may it not be as wisely and kindly, notwithstanding we are ignorant on what account, that he hath made us just such as we are, and no higher or happier?

But though, in all likelihood, we can see only a few of the reasons of God's ways, yet several we may see, at least in some measure. For instance: He governs the world by general laws. On some occasions indeed he hath openly departed from them, and wrought miracles: on many, we have cause to think he secretly restrains and varies them for gracious purposes,

* Psalm cxlv. 9.

purposes, or just correction: but were he not to observe them in the ordinary course of things, we should neither know, what to expect, nor how to proceed. If solid bodies did not weigh downwards, if bodies in motion did not communicate their motion to others, if winds had not a strong force, if rain was not carried about by them, if fire did not heat and consume, if sharp instruments did not cut, the whole frame of nature would be disordered, and stop. If what tends to destroy our lives or our healths did not give us pain, we should take no sufficient care to avoid it. If any one thing almost, that we know, were to fail of commonly producing its natural effect, very general mischiefs, or however inconveniences, would follow: and yet, if they are left to produce their effects, grievous distresses to particulars, from time to time, must be the consequence. Therefore we should learn to respect the regulations of providence, though occasionally we suffer by them. We honour, if we are at all reasonable, whatever laws of our country we know to be for the common good, though often greatly opposite to our own private interest: and surely less honour cannot be due to the laws of heaven.

He, who could make such a world as this, may doubtless have, throughout his conduct of it, wise and good ends in his view, of which we cannot possibly form any conception. Were God to question us, as once he did *Job*; *Where wast thou, when I laid the foundations of the earth; declare, if thou hast understanding**: our answer must be, what one of his friends acknowledged, *We are of yesterday, and know nothing*†: or as the book of *Wisdom* expresses it more largely; *What man is he, that can know the counsel of God? or who can think what the will of the Lord is? For the thoughts of mortal men are miserable, and our devices are but uncertain*‡: Indeed creatures of our own rank, only of abilities perhaps a little superior, lay schemes of which we should never have the least notion, and compass them by methods which we should never suspect, if we were not told them. Now God hath not told us all his ways, and all the reasons of them. Therefore with respect to many things, we must apprehend him to say to us, as the blessed *Jesus* did to *Peter*: *What*

G. 2

I do

* *Job xxxviii. 4.*† *Job viii. 9.*‡ *Wisd. ix. 13, 14.*

I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter *. If we observe with attention, and enquire with humility, we shall find, sooner or later, in various instances, even while we continue on this earth, that seeming evil is real good in some respect or other. But a future life will draw back the veil from multitudes of the divine dispensations, and shew us beauty and order, where nothing appeared to us but horror and confusion. Yet even then we must not expect to know the whole: nor are the highest angels capable of fathoming all the depths of the universal providence of *the only wise God* †.

Faith is the evidence of things not seen ‡: and implicit faith is one of the first and greatest duties of creatures to their Creator. We pay it to men like ourselves every day: and contentedly trust our fortunes, our healths, our lives with them, in consequence of it; notwithstanding they may often mistake, nay sometimes mean us ill. Surely then, without a single murmur, without the least hesitation, we may trust every thing, trust body and soul with God. For are they wiser and better, are we wiser and better, than he? Are we not safer in his hands, than in our own? He doth not do all for us that we wish. But perhaps we wish indiscreetly for what would be much harm to us. Or if not, we think it very fitting, that our servants and inferiors, when we command them, should undergo a great deal for the accomplishment of our purposes; and that multitudes of persons, when required by authority, should risque every thing dear to them, for the general welfare: why is it not fitting then, that we, in our turn, should both give up satisfactions, and bear un-easinesses, to serve the good purposes of God? We are willing, I hope, to suffer more than a little for our friends, for our country, for our prince: why should we not be as willing to suffer every thing for the sake of mankind, and the system of which we are part, when the sovereign of all demands it? We see not indeed perhaps, in what manner our sufferings or our disadvantages benefit others, or make the general state of things better. But *here is the patience and the faith of the saints* §. Thus they have the means of shewing patience in every situation, built on the faith, that all things are conducted well. So far they are conducted well for us; that

* John xiii. 7.

† Heb. xi. 1.

‡ Rom xvi. 27. 1 Tim. i. 17. Jude, Verse 25.

§ Rev. xiii. 10.

that in our lowest and most afflicted condition, when the face of God seems hid from us, his eye watches over us, and while his hand is heaviest upon us, it is leading us ~~to~~ our proper share of happiness. Therefore, as the apostle exhorts, *be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee* *. But all matters are conducted in the highest degree well for the whole: and doubting it is thinking ill of our heavenly Father; for which we can never have cause. Nothing can win upon him to do wrong, nothing deter him from doing right, nothing resist his power; nothing mislead his judgment, nothing escape his attention, who sees through the universe at once. He hath fixed the proper laws and limits for every part, and we have no claim to be exempted. Therefore when we feel ourselves inclined to object, to be moved with indignation, and *tear ourselves in our anger*, as *Job's* friends accuse him of doing, we should check our vehemence; as they check his, by asking, *Shall the earth be forsaken for thee, and the rock be moved out of its place* †? Shall the foundations, on which the great system of nature stands, and by which its good state is preserved, be shaken for the seeming, or the real, benefit of this or that person? If of any one, why not of every one: for what are we more than others? And then nothing can follow, but universal inconsistency and confusion.

Still the duty of submission to God's good pleasure doth not require from us insensibility; for we cannot be insensible of what we undergo, or what we want, or what superior advantages others enjoy. It doth not forbid us to think the present state of things, were we not to look beyond it, irregular and disorderly; provided we look on it as part of a regular whole, that is worthy of its author. For the afflictions and inequalities of this life, are a strong argument for a future one. And though entertaining too low an opinion of the wisdom and goodness, which appears now in the administration of the world, may often proceed from a bad temper, and produce or strengthen impious opinions; yet some may undervalue or dislike beyond reason what they see, merely because they conceive they are bound to excite in their hearts the highest possible esteem of what they hope for: and these, though mistaken, may be in the highest degree religious:
Again:

* Heb. xiii. 5.

† Job xviii. 4.

Again: Thinking with complacency, how agreeable it would be to us, were heaven to change our lot in this or that respect, or place us in the condition of this or that person; nay, wishing it were actually done, provided the wish be formed on the condition, that such were his will, who knows best; nay, though that condition be not always explicitly in our thoughts, yet if we are habitually disposed never absolutely to desire that may be, which God sees fit should not be, we are still within the bounds of innocence. Indeed, the further we suffer our fancies and inclinations to carry us in this road, the more slippery ground we continually tread upon: but thus far we may advance, and not fall. In cases of positive sufferings we may take yet another step: may bemoan ourselves, though not complain of God; may express in our devotions, what he knows we cannot but feel, and lay before him our natural cravings of relief. For thus *David*, after the fullest, and undoubtedly sincerest, profession of resignation, made in the text, immediately subjoins, *take away thy stroke from me: I am even consumed by means of thy heavy hand* *. Thus also good persons in all ages have sought and found ease by submissive applications to the throne of mercy. And if sometimes expostulations have escaped them, which seem not submissive enough, their cooler thoughts have doubtless corrected them, and no failure can be intitled to a more favourable construction. But if our condition be a tolerably comfortable one, or might be such, if we would let it; then we have much more need to lower and suppress our desires of further advantages, than to inflame them by turning them into prayers, Not that we sin, if we endeavour to raise ourselves into a still more agreeable situation, or if we intreat God to bless our endeavours, as far as he judges it convenient. Resignation is very different, not only from despondence, which rather implies dissatisfaction and distrust, but from indolence, which may be totally destitute of any sentiment of piety. And though an indolent person can perhaps be more easily resigned, yet an active one can be more certain, whether he is so in reality, and from a principle of conscience. But the activity exerted by us, when in good circumstances, to improve them into better, should always be accompanied with peculiar moderation of desire: and if we may lawfully pray at all to be rich or great, or in any respect eminent and admired; we ought certainly

to

to pray with far more earnestness, that we may have nothing that will endanger our piety or virtue; but may always be humble and contented, and pleased with whatever the distributing wisdom of the Most High allots us.

Indulging ourselves in the contrary disposition, is disputing with God the government of his own world: and either denying him to be wise and good, or wishing that he were not, but would order things ill for the whole, that our share might be more to our mind. Now what a dreadful sort of spirit is this, and where can it end? Therefore let us be satisfied with the place which he hath assigned us, and bear quietly the burthens which he hath laid upon us. We often submit with very little reluctance to the treatment which we receive from unjust men: why should we not submit without any to the pleasure of a perfectly just God? Could he ever be partial in our favour, he might afterwards change his mind, and be partial against us, and so we could never be secure of any thing. But now *his righteousness standeth like the strong mountains*, which cannot be overturned; at the same time that *his judgements are like the great deep* *, which cannot be fathomed. *Clouds and darknesses are round about him: but righteousness and judgement are the habitation of his throne* †.

Some persons, it may be, are tempted to repine not so much at any want of happiness or feeling of misery, which they experience themselves; as at the general quantity of wretchedness and prevalence of wickedness, which they observe in the world. *My feet were almost gone, my treadings had well nigh slipped. And why? I was grieved at the wicked, I do also see the ungodly in such prosperity* ‡. And indeed, concern on this account seems not only on many occasions useful in human circumstances, but inseparable in human nature from benevolence and love of virtue. But this is only because our nature is imperfect. For God sees infinitely more bad things than we do, and feels an infinitely stronger disapprobation of them, considered in themselves. Yet they cause not the least diminution of his happiness. For he knows, that, through the direction of his wise providence, they will be the means of the greatest good: and therefore we ought to believe it; and be influenced by that faith, as far as we are able. But many pretend, and perhaps imagine, that they are deeply concerned

at

* Psal. xxxvi. 6.

† Psal. xcvi. 2.

‡ Psal. lxxiii. 2, 3.

at the growth of crimes, and the discouragements and decay of goodness, when in truth their chief, if not only, sorrow is, that their party is not uppermost, or their friends have not succeeded; or such as they dislike, have: and were but these things otherwise, the world might be as bad or worse than it is, without their being in the least uneasy at it. Some, on the other hand, care very little, whether right or wrong behaviour prevails amongst men, and dignify their blameable indifference with the specious name of resignation. Now both these faults must be avoided. The cause, in which we are zealous, ought to be that of piety and virtue, and the good of our fellow-creatures: and for this we should have all the zeal, that will excite us to such behaviour in support of it, as belongs to our station. But we must neither attempt any thing beyond proper bounds; nor, if our justest attempts prove unsuccessful, and appearances, in any particular case, or in general, are ever so bad, must we either think ill of God; or worse of men, than they deserve; or give way to impatience, or despair, or immoderate grief; but meekly *commit ourselves*, and every thing, *to him that judgeth righteously* *. Before we perceive what the event of our endeavours will be, we may entertain hopes; but they must be conditional, *if the Lord will* †, not absolute; and moderate not vehement. When we are disappointed, if our desires were such as we need not have formed, we may justly be expected to give them up more entirely: if they were founded in our nature, some involuntary concern will be felt; and instead of being terrified at it, as heinous guilt, we should gently, yet studiously, check it, as mere weakness. But the notion, that we either ought or may allowably indulge ourselves in dissatisfaction or grief, is utterly to be rejected. And the sooner and the more completely we quiet every painful feeling, and bring our minds to a calm acquiescence in the good pleasure of God; the better we are, and the happier it will be for us.

Other motives to bear evil patiently and contentedly are to be sought for from different quarters, as the circumstances of the case require; are often hard to find; and when found, have often small weight and influence. But resignation to the will of our gracious heavenly Father, is one and the same inducement, that naturally presents itself to our thoughts; is equal-
ly

* 1 Pet. ii. 23.

† James iv. 15.

ly suited to all occasions; and while it awes us with the consideration of his absolutely sovereign authority, soothes us with the assurance, that *though he cause grief, yet he will have compassion, according to the multitude of his mercies**. Again: resistance to the purposes of our fellow-creatures may frequently prevail: but reluctance against those of our Maker never can. Therefore, sentiments of dutiful submission spare us the pain of unavailing inward struggles, lessen every suffering, prepare us for every trial. If we will not yield with meekness to the disposal of God, how shall we bear injuries from one another; how indeed shall we refrain from being injurious, when our interests and inclinations prompt us? The practice of self-denying duties, without leaning on heaven for support, is too hard a task for human nature. But such as not only believe the precept, but have formed themselves to feel the impressions of resignation, are in proportion superior to all difficulties. Their spirits are calm; and instead of plunging rashly into deeper distresses and even guilt, as the impatient do, they find their way, if any one can be found, out of every perplexity. By excluding eager hopes and high desires of earthly good, this pious principle excludes also jealous envy, keen resentment, tormenting fears, bitter disappointments, and final dislike of every thing. He that gives himself up into the hands of God, with unfeigned approbation of the divine conduct in whatever may befall him, will act as he ought in all emergencies, with uprightness and alacrity, with courage and honour; will suffer with a composed and even temper; will thus give testimony to the efficacy of religion, and vindicate the dispensations of Providence to mankind. Nor can it fail, but so dutiful a subject to the King of all, so faithful a confessor, so ready a martyr, if need be, in his cause, will obtain from him the strongest consolation here, and the amplest recompence hereafter. Therefore, let us pray earnestly for this blessed disposition, and improve ourselves in it by continual exercises of rational devotion; stir up our faith and our love, when they languish; recover *our steps*, whenever they *had well-nigh slipped*†: *put our trust in the Lord, and be doing good: delight in him, and he shall give us our hearts desire: commit our way unto him, and he shall bring it to pass; bring forth our righteousness as the light, and our judgment as the noon-day*‡.

VOL. I.

H

SER.

* Lam. iii. 32.

† Psal. lxxiii. 2.

Psal. xxxvii. 3,—6.

S E R M O N VI.

ON GIVING THANKS FOR ALL THINGS.

EPH. v. 20.

*Give thanks always for all things unto God and the Father,
in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

I HAVE endeavoured, in three discourses, to instruct you in the duties of patience, contentment and resignation: each rising higher than the other in the scale of right disposition, and advancing further from mere virtue into the superior region of piety. Happy in comparison of others, are such as possess these attainments in any good degree: but even they have another step to take; for *yet shew I unto you a more excellent way* *. It is not sufficient, that we bear sufferings of every kind with all the composure, which our nature admits; that we reflect on the various disadvantages of our respective conditions without repining; that we yield ourselves up to the just and wise disposal of the sovereign Lord of the universe: we are bound also to feel gratitude and express thankfulness to our heavenly Father continually for whatever in the course of his providence befalls us; and this we are to perform, as disciples of his blessed Son our Saviour. Let us consider distinctly the several parts of this most sublime precept: for certainly higher we cannot go.

I. We are to *give thanks always to God.*

II. We are to do it *for all things.*

III. We are to do it *in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

I. We are to give thanks always to God and the Father.

The different orders of sensible beings were created every one for such a degree of happiness, as God saw to be most for the good of the whole: and rational beings were created

to

to confess and celebrate his bounty to themselves and the rest of the world. Giving glory is the due return for having experienced goodness. It is therefore necessarily expected from us by him, who *hath made all things for himself**; and must require them to answer the end for which they were formed. We are sensible it is extremely wrong and unworthy, when we fail of owning the favours which we receive from each other. And what shocking baseness is it then to forget his liberality, who hath *given us life and breath, and all things richly to enjoy*†? For how inconsiderable is whatever any one of us can do for the person whom he loves best, compared to what God hath done for us all! Our very capacity of receiving pleasure from our fellow-creatures proceeds from our Creator, as well as every other source of joy, which we feel to spring up within ourselves. And we feel much less of both, than we might and ought. We are so taken up and disquieted, with imaginary or small misfortunes, with uneasinesses and pains for the most part very supportable, with groundless or excessive discontents and resentments, with needless pursuits, and immoderate hopes and fears, that we suffer multitudes of satisfactions, which Providence brings perpetually in our way, to pass by us unperceived or unnoticed. Yet many of them we should find to be great blessings; for we frequently overlook the very greatest that we have: the means granted us by reason and scripture, situated as we are in a land of light and liberty, of improving in religious knowledge, in rightness of heart and goodness of life; the delights of social, and in particular of domestic friendliness; the continual feasts, which mere health and strength afford, if they are enjoyed with cautious innocence, prudent activity, and a chearful equality of temper. Inconsiderately throwing away, or supinely disregarding, such bountiful provisions for our well-being, is surely the most dreadful waste, of which we can be guilty. But even the lower benefits, entertainments, and amusements of life, even those of them in which all persons may share, such as the very opening of our eyes and looking around, such as the use of every one of our senses, may give us, though singly but little matters, yet being incessantly within our reach, arise on the whole to a vast amount.

H 2

We

* Prov. xvi. 4.

† Acts xvii. 25. 1 Tim. vi. 17.

We do receive a great deal of pleasure from them: and we might receive much more, if we would frame our minds to observe and be pleased with the several objects and occurrences, that present themselves to us almost every moment.

But unhappily, even they, who imagine they are the most judiciously attentive to enjoy from what they like, or from every thing about them, all that they can, are very apt to consider but few things, if any, as matter of thankfulness to God. Yet evidently nothing, which we have cause to think in any degree good, ought to escape being considered in this view. For he is the sole original fountain of good, of every sort of good: not only *the Father of mercies, and God of all comfort* *, with respect to our higher expectations; but the *giver of rain and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness* †; who *openeth his hand, and satisfieth the desire*, the very lowest desire, of *every living thing* ‡. Now would we but reflect on our various enjoyments in this light; as marks and instances of the good-will and kindness of the great Lord of all; as presents, which he graciously condescends to make us; it would raise the worth and dignity of them inexpressible; it would impress us with the strongest conviction of their guilt, who, *when they know God, glorify him not as God, neither are thankful* ¶; it would inspire us with a most pleasing love and reverence to him, preserve us very powerfully from sinning against him by the abuse of his own gifts; and support us under whatever we might suffer in this world, by the assurance that he, of whose bounty we have so large experience here, hath blessings infinitely superior in store for us hereafter.

Let us therefore stir up and cherish in our breasts, a habit of constant thankfulness to heaven: bear always in our thoughts the value of those faculties and powers of body and mind with which we are endowed, of the health and ease which we enjoy or have enjoyed, and remember that *He it is who made us, and not we ourselves* §. Let us reckon over the manifold comforts and accommodations of life, the relations and friends, the agreeable acquaintance, the fair esteem, of which we are possessed, and consider that all these

are

* 2 Cor i. 3.

† Acts xiv. 17.

‡ Psalm cxlv. 16.

¶ Rom. i. 21.

§ Psalm c. 2.

are the donations of a kind providence. Let us raise our views higher : contemplate the inestimable benefits of our redemption ; of the precepts, the examples, the promises of holy writ ; the instructions given us by God's ministers in public, by good persons and good books in private ; the freedom, which we and all around us have of worshipping our Maker, according to our consciences. Let us recollect, at the same time, the security of our persons and properties from oppression in all other respects, as well as this : that the whole exercise of civil authority over us, is legal and mild ; that no one *will* or can *harm* us, *if we are followers of that which is good* *. Let us compare our own condition in these particulars, with that of the multitudes elsewhere, indeed of most men throughout the earth, who sit in darkness and bondage, temporal, and spiritual. Yet even they have cause to praise God. For the most deficient in worldly advantages have many consolations, if they will attend to them properly : the most ignorant shall be accountable only in proportion to their means of knowledge ; and the most faulty shall be judged with every due allowance to the propensities of their nature, and the prejudices of their education. But how much more liberal is our share of whatever *pertains unto life and godliness* † : and what pleasure should we take in paying suitable acknowledgements ! *Blessed are they that dwell in thy house : they will be always praising thee* ‡.

But besides being thankful to God *alway*, we ought.

II. To be thankful to him *for all things*.

That the gift of life, taking the whole of it together, is justly a ground of thanksgiving, we cannot question, without questioning also the goodness of the giver. Yet whether we are indeed thankful, and to what degree, for the sum total of it united, we should do well to examine ourselves. But the apostle expressly enjoins us to be so for each part separately. Be it ever so afflictive, we have deserved much worse : and therefore ought to bless our merciful Father, that the blow came no sooner, that it was no heavier, that it was repeated no oftener. But then, besides, the same apostle hath told us, *that all things work together for good to them who love God* §. We are extremely prone to think otherwise, when any unpleasant occurrence

* 1 Pet. iii. 13. † 2 Pet. i. 3. ‡ Psal. lxxxiv. 4. § Rom. viii. 28.

occurrence befalls us; and to say with good old *Jacob*, *all these things are against me* *. But as he found most unexpectedly, that the grievances, which he bemoaned, were the very instruments of his happiness throughout the remainder of his days: so have very many since, and so very possibly may we, experience the like unforeseen connection. I have shewn you, in speaking on the subjects related to this, from what evils our sufferings or disadvantages often preserve us, what benefits they often procure us. Indeed we frequently acknowledge, that to such or such a misfortune or disappointment we are indebted for our escape from destructive dangers; or our attainment of most desirable blessings. But we might discern many more events of this nature, would we look for them: and we should believe there are such very commonly, when we cannot see them. It is an act of duty owing to him, whose power and wisdom can easily bring good out of evil: and an act of prudence, which we owe to ourselves, as the sure way of turning every gloomy appearance into a cheerful one.

And were our troubles and crosses never to end in augmenting our temporal welfare, yet they may and will, if it be not our own fault, contribute to a far greater felicity, our moral and spiritual improvement. Sometimes we cannot avoid perceiving their medicinal and salutary tendency: often we might perceive it by the help of a little serious consideration: and they may be extremely requisite, when at the time we perceive it not. For both our outward dangers and our inward weaknesses are very commonly unseen by us: whence we imagine ourselves to be in perfect safety, while we are really in imminent hazard. But the Great Physician of our souls knows our true and whole state: and it is unspeakable goodness in him, to apply the remedies, be they ever so rough, which our case demands, and a due regimen observed on our part will render effectual. When a needful, but harsh operation is prescribed to be performed on us by one of our fellow-creatures, though we are sensible we must feel from it exquisite pain, yet we chuse to undergo it, we desire to have it completely gone through without sparing us; and even during the smart, we bless the skilful hand, that inflicts the wound. Surely then we should bear as willingly, at least, the *chastenings of the Lord*, and *neither faint nor murmur when we are rebuked of him*. For
whom

* Gen. xlii. 36.

whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth; and scourgeth every son, whom he receiveth *.

The worldly advantages, that we have wished for in vain, might not only have failed to produce in us a due sense of gratitude towards God, which alone would have been heinous guilt, but might have tempted us to irregularities, to pride, to injurious behaviour, to a ruinous choice of the good things of this life for our portion: whereas the uneasinesses and sorrows, that we groan under, may secure us from vicious courses, may teach us humility and compassion, may raise our affections above earthly objects. *Before I was afflicted, saith the psalmist, I went astray: but now have I kept thy word. It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes* †. *No chastening for the present, saith the apostle, seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless, afterwards, it yieldeth the peaceable fruits of righteousness unto them, which are exercised thereby* ‡. *If men be holden in cords of affliction, saith Elihu in Job, then God sheweth them their work, and their transgressions, that they have exceeded: he openeth their ear to discipline; and commandeth, that they return from iniquity. If they obey and serve him, they shall spend their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasure* §.

Whatever makes us better, will ordinarily make us happier even now. For our faults and follies are what usually bring on our troubles: and in that case amendment is the likeliest way to remove them, and prevent more. Or suppose it proves otherwise, mere consciousness of amendment will administer no small consolation. And as there is very commonly pitiable wretchedness hid under shewish prosperity, so there may be sweet tranquility of mind under sore calamities. *In the multitude of the sorrows, that I had in my heart, thy comforts have refreshed my soul* ¶. Innocence gives great joy in the midst of sufferings: why may not piety, superadded to innocence or to penitence, give greater? Few, alas, are qualified for such feelings; and therefore the mention of them may seem strange: but as they are perfectly rational, we may justly, on the authority of scripture, believe God to excite and strengthen them in devout minds to such a degree, as to make them abundantly an over-balance to the heaviest pressures of this life. Or if they

be

* Heb. xii. 5, 6.

† Psal. cxix. 67, 71..

‡ Heb. xii. 11.

§ Job xxxvi. 8, —11.

¶ Psal. xciv. 19.

be not, the christian temper, formed and cultivated within us by the means of these pressures, will fit us for higher rewards in the life to come. So that indeed the burthens, which our Maker lays upon us, are intended by him, who *knoweth* our *frame*, and *whereof* we are made *, as a requisite preparation for our truest good; that we may be *strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto patience and long suffering with joyfulness*; and give thanks unto the Father, who *maketh us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light* †. Were we but influenced by this consideration as we ought, we should say to God with pleasing wonder, what *Job* saith by way of discontented expostulation. *What is man, that thou shouldest magnify him thus; that thou shouldest set thine heart upon him; that thou shouldest visit him every morning, and try him every moment* ‡?

But supposing the trials we undergo, should not improve our virtues at all, yet they must be deemed a very severe exercise of them: and even were such exercise to impair some of them a little; provided it be not through undutiful misbehaviour under them, but merely from weakness, contrary to our wills and best endeavours, undoubtedly every single circumstance of our case will be equitably considered in our favour. It is true, our most laborious service hath no merit in it: but through the unmerited goodness of God, if we *endure hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ* §, we shall be plentifully recompensed by the Captain of our Salvation ¶. For, as St. Paul triumphantly expresses it, *all things are for our sakes*, every dispensation of providence is designed to encrease our future blessedness, that the abundant grace may, through the thanksgiving of many, redound to the glory of God. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory ||. Therefore let us, like him, as well as can, *rejoice in tribulations; knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope; and hope maketh not ashamed* **.

Still we are by no means to run, either wilfully or carelessly into unnecessary troubles; or expose ourselves by indolence and neglect to unnecessary losses, failures, and disappointments: for under such we have no promise that heaven will support us, or make us the least compensation for them. But when the hand

of

* Psal. ciii. 14.

† Col. i. 11, 12.

‡ Job vii. 17, 18.

§ 2 Tim. ii. 3. ¶ Heb. ii. 10. || 2 Cor. iv. 15, 17. ** Rom. v. 2, 5.

of providence brings them on, *God is faithful, who will not suffer us to be tempted above that we are able* * : and since he will also reward us for bearing what he strengthens us to bear, well may we *count it all joy, when led by him, we fall into divers temptations* †.

Joy of this kind indeed, will unavoidably be mixed, in our weak natures, with an alloy of uneasiness, and probably no small one. But be it ever so great, were it enough to extinguish for the present all feeling of pleasure and thankfulness intirely; yet we may certainly reflect, that we have cause to be pleased and thankful, if we could. And this alone will make our worst sufferings much more tolerable, than if we were to consider them as so much evil without any thing to counterbalance it. Besides, by looking on every thing in so animating a view, appearances will gradually change for the better, the vigour of our minds will augment, and we shall come to smile at events, that formerly would have terrified and overwhelmed us. But this is wholly on supposition, that, with our heartiest efforts, we join our most earnest prayers for *grace to help in time of need* ‡. The attacks upon us are often sudden, violent, and long: our own abilities, we have had but too much proof, are inconsiderable; and apt to fail us the most, when we depend on them with the fullest confidence. But the divine assistance can enable us to do every thing: and, though our beginnings be feeble, yet, if we sincerely trust in God, and faithfully exert the powers he will give us, *out of weakness we shall be made strong* §, and not only *run with patience the race that is set before us* ¶, but *greatly rejoice that now for a season, if need be, we are in heaviness through manifold temptations*; well knowing the gracious intention of our heavenly Father to be this, *that the trial of our faith may be found unto praise, and honour, and glory, at the appearing, of Jesus Christ* ||.

Let us therefore seriously and often recollect not only the monstrous ingratitude of repining, and the very blameable unreasonable-ness of despondency, but the strong obligation of being as thankful for all things, as the infirmity of our nature will permit. Indeed merely using pious words of thankfulness for afflictions, insincerely, without any correspondent sense of

VOL. I.

I

what

* 1 Cor. x. 13.

† James i. 2.

‡ Heb. iv. 16

§ Heb. xi. 34.

¶ Heb. xii. 1.

|| 1 Pet. i. 6, 7.

what we utter, would be an affectation, disgustful to men, and provoking to God. But forming our hearts, in the degree that we are able, to the real spirit of it, is one of the noblest exercises of inward devotion. As we are imperfect in every duty, we shall in all likelihood be more peculiarly imperfect in so exalted and difficult a one: and we should not be dejected on finding that we are. But neither should we ever cease either praying or endeavouring to attain what is in truth a valuable part of the temper of heaven. When we come thither, we shall clearly perceive the usefulness of our most exquisite sufferings here, and praise God for them to eternity; therefore let us be persuaded of their usefulness in the mean time, and begin to praise him for them now.

But these and all our praises the apostle directs us,

III. To offer up *in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*.

By him, as the scripture expressly teaches, *God made the worlds* *: *by him were all things created, that are in heaven and that are in earth, visible and invisible: all things were created by him and for him, and by him all things consist* †. Therefore in every act of worship, his name is to be joined with that of the Father Almighty. By him have the various dispensations of providence been administered from the beginning: and particularly that most important one of the restoration of fallen and corrupted man, *through the tender mercy of our God* ‡, *who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son; in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of our sins* §. Therefore all our thanksgivings ought to commemorate the source of all our blessings. *Honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever. For thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God through thy blood, out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation* ¶. By him also was the knowledge of their duty and hopes revealed to mankind: *by him the day-spring from on high visited us to give light to them that sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, and guide our feet into the way of peace* **. *Through the spirit of Christ, which was in them* ††, the prophets of the Old Testament directed and cheered the earlier ages: his own personal instructions much more abundantly en-

lightened

* Heb. i. 2. † Col. i. 16, 17. ‡ Luke i. 78. § Col. i. 13, 14.

¶ Rev. v. 13, 19. ** Luke i. 78, 79. †† 1 Pet. x. 11.

lightened the apostles : and the succession of teachers, which he appointed, hath conveyed the glad tidings of his gospel down to us, and will to the world's end. *Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift **.

Reasoning had bewildered men in multitudes of errors, and led them into very little truth. It could not lead them into any certainty of those truths, which were of the greatest importance to sinners : pardon, grace, and eternal happiness. It could not assure us of that comfortable doctrine of the text, that we have cause to thank God for every thing which befalls us. For how should the wisest of men attain, by the mere exercise of his own faculties, to know whether it be possible in the nature of things, and sit upon the whole, for the Supreme Being to order all events in such a manner, as that every one of them shall be for the benefit of every good person ? We may wish this indeed ; we may hope it ; and it is the most glorious hope that we are capable of : but a ground of firm reliance can be only from the gracious declarations of our blessed Lord, or his authorized servants : and we are strictly bound to ask and receive this and every bounty from above, as believers in him. Justly then doth St. Paul direct us : *Whatsoever ye do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him †*. And again : *In every thing give thanks : for this is the will of God in Jesus Christ concerning you ‡*. Suitably to which precepts, St. Peter represents it as the great end of our whole behaviour, *that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ §*. By him therefore, as the epistle to the Hebrews exhorts, *let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, giving thanks to his name ¶*. His merciful purpose in what he hath done for us, and what he hath taught us, is that we may be happy, not only hereafter, but even here. *These things have I spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation : but be of good cheer ; I have overcome the world ***. He underwent, on our account, the most dreadful of all afflictions, for this reason amongst others, *to leave us an example that we should follow his steps ††*, and look unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith, *that we may not be wearied and faint in our minds ‡‡ ; but rejoice in as much as we are partakers of Christ's sufferings,*

I 2

that

* 2 Cor. ix. 15.

† Col. iii. 17.

‡ 1 Thess. v. 18.

§ 1 Pet. iv. 11.

¶ Heb. xiii. 15.

** John xvi. 33.

†† 1 Pet. ii. 21.

‡‡ Heb. xii. 2, 3.

that when his glory shall be revealed, we may be glad with exceeding joy*.

And now, were but all who profess Christianity careful to qualify themselves for looking on the various occurrences of life, whether prosperous or adverse, as tokens of God's kind purposes towards them for the sake of his dear Son, and conscientious in paying him sincerely suitable acknowledgments: how void would they be of resentment to each other; how full of pity to such as would injure them, knowing that they can only hurt themselves: what a pleasing security against fear and disappointment, what *strong consolation*† under sorrow and pain, what a powerful support under all the decays of body or mind would they enjoy: how delightful would be their intercourse with Heaven, consisting almost wholly in acts of gratitude and praise: how blissful a sense of God's love to them must they feel continually increasing; and how irresistible a recommendation of *the doctrine of God our Saviour*‡ must these admirable fruits of it exhibit to all mankind! Very different is the present state of things. But to every one who steadily practises this duty, the benefits of it are just the same as if it were practised universally. All outward molestations, instead of destroying his inward peace, contribute, he knows, to promote his true welfare. And though he is tenderly grieved for the guilt, and the misery present and future, of the incorrigibly bad, while they applaud themselves, and despise or hate him, yet his concern is tempered with that placid acquiescence in the most awful parts of God's will, which the Redeemer, though *he wept over Jerusalem*§, felt when he said: *I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, meaning in their own imaginations, and hast revealed them unto babes*, persons of an humble simplicity of heart: *Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight*¶. Yet, though cordially reconciled to every thing which he sees and expects, the good Christian pleases himself peculiarly with the prospect of that promised time, when on this earth *all the people shall be righteous*** : but inexpressibly more with the assurance of a blessed eternity, in which all who are accounted worthy to partake shall at length magnify the Judge of the world, with unmixed delight, for every thing they have

* Pet. iv. 13.

† Heb. vi. 18.

‡ Tit. ii. 10.

§ Luke xix. 41.

¶ Mat. xi. 25, 26. Luke x. 21.

** Isa. lx. 21.

suffered, as well as every thing they have enjoyed ; and sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, the final result of all the divine revelations, recorded from the first, saying : Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty : just and true are thy ways, thou King of Saints. Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name ? For thou only art holy,—thy judgments are made manifest *.

* Rev. xv. 3, 4.

S E R M O N VII.

OF AN INOFFENSIVE LIFE.

ISAIAH i. 16, 17.

—*Cease to do evil, learn to do well*—

THE order in which these words are placed, was evidently designed to teach us, that the foundation of acting right is avoiding every thing wrong. Several other parts of scripture lay down the same rule in almost the same terms *: and many express, or imply, the same doctrine; putting repentance before faith and obedience †. Even heathen authors, in very distant ages and countries, have given the like direction ‡. And indeed every one must own the justness of it: but still very few appear to perceive or attend sufficiently to its importance: which, therefore, I shall endeavour to shew you,

I. More briefly, in respect of our conduct in general:

II. More at large, in respect of our behaviour to each other.

I. In respect of our conduct in general.

It is plainly the natural and rational method to begin with removing what else will obstruct our progress, and to make unity within our own breasts our earnest care. He who hath only consistent pursuits may follow them with a prospect of success: but a mind, divided and distracted between contrary principles of action, can hope for nothing, but to be drawn backward and forward by them continually, as they chance to prevail

* Psal. xxxiv. 14. xxxvii. 27. Amos v. 15. Rom. xii. 9. 1 Pet. iii. 11.

† Matth. xxi. 32. Mark i. 15. Acts xx. 21. Tit. ii. 12, 13.

‡ Θερραπεια και ωλιζα [ή παιδεια] τη καθαρίσει δύναμις· εὖ δὲ ὅταν καθαρῶσιν, ἡ τὸς αὐτοὺς εὐχαρὰ πρὸς τὰς ἀρετὰς, κ. τ. λ. Ceb. Tab. p. 35. Ed. Salm. Sapientia prima est stultitia carnis. Hor. Epist. i. 1. Τὸς ἀρχομένους ἀπο μόχθησιν ἀγάθης ἐπὶ καλλίονα μεταβαίνειν χρη πρῶτον εἶναι τὸν τῆς κακοζωνίας ἰόν, καὶ τότε τοῖς τῆς εὐζωνίας ἀγαθοῖς τρεῖσθαι. Ἡ γὰρ πρῶτη ἀρχὴ μόχθησι τὰ πρῶτα χρῆσθαι διαφθάραι—ὥστε ἡ τάξις ἀπὸ τῆς εὐζωνίας καλὰ δοχῇ. Simpl. in Epist. c. 6.

prevail in their turns. Things, indeed, that do but accidentally give some little hindrance to each other now and then, may be prosecuted together, and the due preference, when they interfere, be adjusted well enough. But sin and duty are so essentially opposite, that their interests can never be reconciled. They flow from different motives, proceed by different means, aim at different ends, and thwart one another perpetually. And it is to men's overlooking this obvious truth, that the miscarriage of their good intentions, the irresolution of their lives, the incoherence of their characters, in a great measure, owes its rise. Every one of us knows, in the main, what he ought to do: every one feels an approbation of it; and so far, at least, a disposition to it. But then he feels also dispositions quite adverse: and though he sees them to be unwarrantable, yet it is painful to root them out, and not pleasing even to take notice of them. So, to avoid trouble, both sorts are allowed to grow up together as they can; and, which will thrive faster, soon appears. The soil, corrupt nature, is by far the most inclined to weeds: they sprout up without number, and choke the good seed. Perhaps but one or two sorts of wickedness were intended to be indulged: but these have unforeseen connections with others, and those with more. Or, had they none, when men have once yielded to do but a single thing amiss, they have no firm ground to stand upon in refusing to do a second, and a third: so gradually they lose their strength, God withdraws his help, and they fall from bad to worse. Often this ends in their present worldly ruin. But if they escape it, nay, if they escape growing continually more wicked, still they are incapable of that delightful consciousness which arises from uniform integrity of heart; they can have no true peace, while vices are struggling in their breasts with one another, as well as with virtue; they condemn, they lament themselves; they make earnest resolutions to reform in this and that point; but making none to reform in all, they relapse, and go on as they did before. Many of them try hard, and no wonder, to get opinions that will quiet them in their practices: amongst which one of the most prevalent is, the notion of compensating by good deeds for evil. But how can our best actions possibly make amends for our sins, when they are only *our duty**, though we had never sinned? Or if any one doth bring himself to be-

lieve

* Luke xvii. 10.

lieve this ; in proportion as he becomes more easy, he will become more profligate. He will think himself at liberty to commit any crime he pleases, provided he doth but intend to give God such or such satisfaction for it, which, perhaps, he will afterwards forget, or invent some pretence to omit. But if he doth not ; as they that run these lengths quickly come to value their good deeds at as high, and their ill at as low a rate as they have a mind ; they commonly reckon a very little of the former equivalent to a great deal of the latter. And if they are but noted for any single instance of obedience, it gives them vanity enough to esteem themselves not only safe, but highly in the divine favour, let them disobey in ever so many : perhaps it dazzles and blinds them so, that they scarcely perceive their own failures in any, or scarcely imagine them worth regarding. Nay, sometimes acts of mere superstition and folly, indeed of wickedness too, under a thin disguise of religion, have been all the atonement offered to heaven for an ill-spent life, and have been deemed a most meritorious one. But will God accept even a real part of what we owe him, when paid with design to cheat him of the rest ? His nature, his word, plainly tell us the contrary. He is holy, and requires universal holiness. He hath warned us, that *no man can serve two masters* * : and that *whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all* †. Such therefore only as are careful to do every thing which they ought, and are sensible, that when they have done all, they are *unprofitable servants* ‡, intitled to acceptance only for the sake of a gracious Redeemer's merits, have cause to hope well. Others *build on the sand*, but they *on a rock* §. Their superstructure will stand firm against storms, and may be safely raised to the greatest heights. God will pardon their infirmities, and assist their endeavours : they will of course be making a continual progress, and for every step of it will receive a proportionable reward, probably here, certainly hereafter. In short, let men devise what methods they will, there is but one effectual : *keep innocency, and take heed unto the thing that is right : for that shall bring a man peace at the last* ¶.

But though avoiding to do evil through the whole of our conduct is requisite, if ever we would do well : yet in the text,
by

* Matth. vi. 24.

† James ii. 10.

‡ Luke xvii. 10.

§ Matth. vii. 24,—27.

¶ Psal. xxxvii. 23.

by what precedes and follows, the prophet seems to have intended it peculiarly as a direction for our social conduct: where, indeed, we shall find it peculiarly necessary, when we consider,

II. The importance of behaving inoffensively to each other.

It is a remarkable thing in the constitution of this world, that we have much more power of producing misery in it than happiness. Every one, down to the most insignificant, is capable of giving uneasiness and disquiet, nay, grievous pain and affliction to others, and often to great numbers, without the least difficulty; while even those of superior abilities in every way, can hardly discover the means, unless it be within a very narrow compass now and then, of doing any great good, or communicating any considerable pleasure. Besides, the effects of kindnesses may always be intirely lost: but those of injuries too frequently can never be remedied. And therefore we ought to watch over ourselves with perpetual care, examine the tendency of all our words and actions, and, not contented with meaning no harm, be solicitous to do none. The harm that we do through heedlessness is certainly not so criminal, as if it were purposely contrived: but may be almost, ~~if~~ not quite, as severely felt notwithstanding: or though it were but slightly, why should we be so inadvertent, as unnecessarily to cause but an hour's, nay, a moment's vexation or grief to one of our brethren; or deprive him of the smallest of those innocent gratifications, that help to alleviate the sorrows of life, and make the passage through it comfortable? The little we enjoy of good, is, with reason, very precious to us: and we have a right to expect, that others should take the trouble of some moderate caution, not to trample upon and destroy it. Human happiness is a tender plant, which every rude breath is sufficient to blast: and all have so quick a sense, and most men so warm a resentment of any thing done, though innocently, against their interests or inclinations, that they ought by no means to be indifferent about those of any one else. Yet how often are not only smaller inconveniences, but heavy sufferings, brought, from very trifling or very bad motives, on such as did not deserve them? Some, under colour of the tenderest affection, seduce inconsiderate creatures, who, but for them, would never have thought of doing amiss, into guilt and wretchedness, merely to gratify a brutal appetite, or gain empty applause from fellow-libertines. Others attempt their acquaintance, by fallacious

arguments and bad examples, to imprudence, extravagance, intemperance, impiety. A third sort entertain themselves, and their ill-chosen friends, by exposing to scorn, or disquieting with vexation, just whomsoever their fancy points out to them: often the very persons whom they ought to respect the most. And the authors of all these distresses can raise themselves diversion even from reflecting upon them afterwards; and, by doing mischief with so much good-humour, appear in the eyes of the world, and in their own, to be very far from ill-natured. And, it may be, on some occasions they are not such: it may be, they have not, on any, deliberately purposed to be such. But still the fruits of indulging either sensual desires, or even vanity and idle gait, without regard to consequences, may be as bitter as those of the keenest malice. Nay, indeed the disguised smiling enemy is the more dangerous, as he is unsuspected; and the more wicked, as he is unprovoked.

But men of more stayed and thoughtful characters venture also too commonly on dreadful ill-treatment of others, and yet make a shift to think well of themselves: not only *withhold good from him to whom it is due, when it is in the power of their hand to do it**, but prey upon their neighbours by oppression and fraud, *grind the face of the poor*†, take advantage of the necessity or ignorance of those with whom they are concerned; exact, without regard to equity, whatever they can legally demand; and imagine it very easy to procure a dispensation for all this, if they need any. Some have attempted it by voluntary mortifications and abstinence. But *the fast which God hath chosen, is to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and let the oppressed go free*‡. Some by acts of devotion: but *he that turneth his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination*§. Some by liberalities to pious or charitable uses: but God himself hath told us: *I the Lord love judgement, I hate robbery for burnt-offering*¶. He expects restitution to the injured, not bounty to other purposes, instead of it: much less indiscreet generosities to the undeserving, or expensive acts of vanity and voluptuousness, under pretence of encouraging trade and labour; which many seem to think an abundant counterbalance to ever

so

* Prov. iii. 27.

† Isa. iii. 15.

‡ Isa. lviii. 6.

§ Prov. xxviii. 8.

¶ Isa. lxi. 8.

so much deceit and rapine, as well as debauchery and irreligion.

There is yet a third sort, who, valuing themselves highly on their sobriety and honesty, conceive their disrespect to superiors, their contempt of inferiors, their want of courtesy to equals, their causeless or immoderate anger, their evil-speaking and uncharitableness, to be small sins, or none. Yet surely, if any thing be our own, the enjoyment of our lives and characters in peace and quiet, unmolested by rude insults, malicious or peevish resentments, unjust aspersions, is our most valuable property, and taking it away from us, one of the worst kinds of cruelty.

Were it ever so possible to do equal good, in return for the harm done in one or other of these ways: what right hath any one to play thus with the most serious interests of his fellow-creatures; to commit injuries first, then make amends for them, when and how he thinks fit? If it be to a different person, the sufferer is not in the least the better for that. If it be to the same, still what amends can there be made for seducing, impoverishing, blackening, breaking the spirits of, another? Happiness in this world is not felt like misery: and one poor creature, treated in any respect unmercifully, may soon undergo, much more, than numbers, kindly used, or plentifully provided for, will ever enjoy.

Surely then to refrain from doing harm is a very important duty: and no request can be juster for one of us to make to another, than that if we may not hope for any of those acts of positive goodness from him, which yet human nature and circumstances frequently call for, he would, however, abstain from hurting us; and allow us the undisturbed possession of whatever we have cause to think valuable, and he hath nothing to do with. In other things commanded, there may be frequently some room for a plea of ignorance or doubt: in this hardly ever. The weakest and dullest of us can easily perceive, when we suffer injuries: now it is not a whit more difficult, only we have less inclination, to observe when we are guilty of them: and therefore we have no excuse for it. When men are exhorted to deeds of charity and beneficence, they can find a thousand reasons against complying: their ability is small, or the calls upon them are many; or they cannot see, that they are bound to give more alms than they do already; or they have not time or convenience for inquiring into cases; or, if one be recom-

mended to them, it may be partially represented; or the care of it belongs rather to such and such, than to them: and numberless evasions besides, by which an unwilling heart betrays, while it studies to conceal, itself. But were they to be allowed every allegation, that scrupulousness of being too good can suggest to them: at least their wariness and caution should incline them to be equally scrupulous on the other side. To do no wrong, they certainly have in their power; and they owe it to every one; and the limits of this obligation have no such great obscurity, but that all the world will see, whether they exceed them or not. If, therefore, they will shew a right disposition in, what is undoubtedly in their power, being conscientiously inoffensive; then it may be credible, but not else, that they would shew it in more things, were they able.

And, strange as it may appear to speak of what seems a mere negative quality, as a real good: yet scarce any words are strong enough to express, how much good bare cessation from doing evil would produce. Consider only, how the world groans under the various sufferings, which we bring upon each other; so various, that it is in vain to think of representing to one's self, in how many ways the lives, healths, fortunes, reputation, peace, comfort of men are fatally attacked: what blows are sometimes given to the happiness of multitudes at once; how far more private injuries frequently extend their consequences; involving undesigning and unknown persons in calamities; affecting successive generations; teaching and encouraging wickedness by ill example; provoking retaliation and revenge; perpetuating contention, bitterness, and rancour. In short, the state of man upon earth would be quite another thing than it is; and the whole of human affairs put on a face intirely new; if we would be content to permit it; if, without contributing to our mutual happiness, we would only not obstruct it. Sudden deliverance from any acute pain hath been thought, by those who have experienced it, the most exquisite pleasure they ever felt. How inexpressibly delightful then would the first breathing of ease be to mankind, if, after the reciprocal torments of so many ages, they were all to leave off together, and become harmless at once! But without hoping yet for the promised time of universal innocence, when men *shall not hurt nor destroy in all God's holy mountain**, and in consequence of it

shall

* Isa. xi. 9.

shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away * : at present, in each particular instance, whoever only takes off his hand from those on whom it lies heavy, cannot fail to give them great joy : and if he doth it in a proper manner, may secure to himself as much gratitude from them, as by the highest unmerited obligation. Ill usage of others naturally makes them our enemies : the marks of their enmity provoke to worse usage of them : and so the evil increases without end, unless the injurious party hath wisdom to stop first : and then it is generally in his power, by an honourable acknowledgment of his fault, or, perhaps, a mere intimation that he is convinced of it, not only to be forgiven, but respected and beloved ever after. And who doth not know, how pleasing the consciousness of being esteemed is, how mortifying that of being hated ?

There would indeed be little occasion comparatively for the exercise of kindness amongst men, if practices of a contrary tendency were not so frequent. A very great part of our good actions is really nothing more, than endeavouring to undo the harm, that we or others have done. And abstaining from doing any would take away the necessity of them ; would strike at the root of misery, prevent the shocking sight of it, the burden and expence of relieving it. Remedies for evils are painful, uncertain, imperfect things : always to be applied indeed, when they are wanted : but the true precaution is, not to give being to unhappiness. Were we all to take the utmost care, there would, notwithstanding, be too much of it. But the obligation and means of lessening it would be more evident : mens dispositions, when purged from ill-will, insolent negligence, and perverse caprice, would be more tender and compassionate ; and *from the good treasure of the heart, good things would be brought forth* abundantly †. With such a temper, every one would enjoy most comfortable reflexions within himself : and, though his condition were ever so low and disadvantageous, would be often useful in one way or another, and constantly agreeable, to all around him. We are formed to give and receive mutual pleasure : and our common daily conversation would be delightful to us, if wrongs, and unkindnesses, and flights, did not estrange us from, and set us against, each other. Bad as we are, designing, suspicious, gloomy, haughty, neglectful, provoking ; society is necessary for us : we have
hardly

* Isa. xxxv. 10.

† Matth. xii. 35.

hardly any notion of cheerfulness without it: but what should we think and find it, were we assured of the friendliness and regard of all we met? The very being together, the countenance of man, would be reviving: and continual opportunities of innocent entertainment would spring up, besides the occasional ones of reciprocal service and assistance in matters of consequence. But of these also there would be more and greater, when we were once inclined to look for them, than we can well conceive now. And though a person could do good only in small instances, it would be pure and unmixed; and that alone would be sufficient to make it considerable. But were it ever so little: though man judges by outward acts, the valuable thing in the sight of God is virtuous intention: and the fundamental part of that, is care to avoid evil. In proportion as we root out hurtful inclinations, right ones will not fail to shoot up, and bring forth fruit: if in less quantity, yet such as will be accepted; but probably in plenty.

*Love, saith the apostle, worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law**. Accordingly we find righteousness, which, taken strictly, is nothing but abstaining from injustice, often mentioned in scripture, as the whole of our duty: because, if we begin with that, the rest will easily follow. And *David*, in describing the qualifications of the Man, that *shall abide in the tabernacle of the Lord, and dwell on his holy hill*, principally insists on the negative ones. *He that leadeth an uncorrupt life, and doth the thing which is right, and speaketh the truth from his heart. He that hath used no deceit in his tongue, nor done evil to his neighbour†*. Again, the abovementioned apostle joins the character of mere innocence with the most honourable title, which can be given to men: *that ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God without rebuke‡*: a character, which it is the peculiar prerogative of him, who is in the highest sense the Son of God, to deserve in perfection. But, as *St. Peter* observes, *he hath left us an example, that we should follow his steps; who did not sin, neither was guile found in his mouth§*.

Thus I have endeavoured to shew you the importance of the plain humble duty of an inoffensive life: a duty, which, if experience did not prove the contrary, one should imagine there could

* Rom. xiii. 10. † Psalm xv. 2, 3. ‡ Phil. ii. 15. § 1 Pet. ii. 21, 22.

could be no need of using many words to recommend: as it appears impossible to reflect on wilful transgressions of it, and the mischiefs they cause, without horror. It is true, sufferings of all kinds are now so common in the world, that, unless it be when we ourselves, or they who are dear to us, undergo them, they are apt to make but little impression upon us: and we can pronounce that melancholy variety of dreadful words, which the miseries of mankind have introduced into language, almost without concern. But would we only recollect a while; consult our own memories, for they can generally inform us too well; or learn from such accounts, if there be occasion, as it is easy to procure; what those feelings are, which the terms, grief, anxiety, pain, anguish, dejection, despair, and more of the same sort, were framed to express: surely we should have a strong conviction, that for a human creature to inflict any of these on one of his brethren, without necessity and without authority, merely for some trifling provocation, or poor worldly advantage, to gratify some base appetite, or perhaps only to indulge a silly whim, is most frightful wickedness. For, terrible evils as they are in themselves, being exposed to them unjustly aggravates them so, as to make often the severest part of their torment. Then to think too of such things, as done to each other by short-lived helpless wretches, that are subject, to unavoidable burdens, heavier than they know how to bear: to think of these, deliberately doubling and trebling their mutual sorrows: in direct contradiction, to the exigency of their own circumstances, which loudly require of them forbearance, compassion, beneficence; to the dictates of their own consciences, which reproach them for every harsh action or expression they are guilty of; and to his known will and positive commands, from whom they have received all that they enjoy, and on whom it depends, whether they shall be everlasting happy or miserable: it is so amazing, that no tongue can set forth, no heart conceive sufficiently, the sinfulness or the folly of such conduct. His great design is the good of his creation. He requires us not to obstruct it, but contribute to it. This is the principal mark of gratitude, which our bounteous benefactor desires of us: the principal duty, which our lawgiver and judge enjoins us. We, at all adventures, resolve to disregard him whenever we please; and boldly pursue our worldly interests, our sensual appetites, our ill-natured passions, our wayward humours, our wildest fancies, right or wrong, let who will be
the

the worse for it. What notion can a man have of himself, who acts thus : what notion of his maker, to hope it can ever end well ? We are accustomed to it indeed ; and therefore may be tempted to look on it as a slight matter. But our Maker will determine at last, not according to the prejudices of men, but the truth of things. We are disposed to entertain very favourable opinions of our own behaviour : and even when we see it to be wrong, if we are of low degree, we hope to be passed over as inconsiderable ; if of high, to be treated hereafter with some peculiar tenderness and deference. But *God is no respecter of persons* * : the meanest is not beneath his notice ; the greatest is not above his power ; the difference between them is as nothing in his eyes ; and both shall be punished or rewarded according to their deeds. May he therefore grant us all to take immediately the only method of shunning his wrath, and securing his favour, by considering our ways impartially, for else we may believe things to be allowable, nay commendable, which are highly criminal : by holding fast our integrity, so far as we have hitherto preserved it : by *ceasing to do evil and learning to do well*, in whatever respects we are faulty or deficient : by faith in his mercy for pardon, and his grace for strength, through the merits and mediation of our blessed redeemer : to whom, &c.

* Acts x. 34.

S E R M O N V I I I .

ON EQUITY.

MATT. vii. 12.

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.

THE largest number of particular directions can never possibly equal the infinite variety of circumstances, in which human creatures are concerned to act: nor can the memories of most retain any considerable part of these, which might be given. And therefore, though the utmost care were taken to specify to us our several obligations, we must be left after all to find out many of them ourselves, by deducing them from general rules, and these, (when they carry in them the evidence of their own truth and rightness) at the same time that they extend our knowledge to cases, which have not been distinctly mentioned to us, afford us also a clearer conviction of our duty in such as have: by shewing us, that the different commands, to which we are subjected, flow from the same source, and carry the same reasonableness along with them.

Our blessed Saviour, therefore, after delivering separately, in his sermon on the mount, all the chief precepts of the most exalted and refined morality, takes care, just before the conclusion of it, to comprehend the whole, both of what he had said and what he had omitted, concerning the ties of men to each other, in one universal law of life. *Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye unto them.* Not that he was the first who made any use of this admirable maxim. God forbid the world should have been ignorant of so necessary and so plain a direction for their behaviour, till that time. Both Jews and heathens had seen its equity, and felt its force, in

some degree. But still more was wanting to complete its usefulness: and that our Lord supplied. Most, if not all, other teachers, had expressed it in the negative form: as *Tobit*, for instance, *do that to no man, which thou hatest* *. And so it served only to restrain mutual injuries. But he laid it down in the affirmative, as an injunction also of proper kindnesses. They spoke of it no otherwise than incidentally, and without ascribing any singular prerogative to it. But he recommended it, as taking in the entire compass of social virtue. They could support it only by argument: but he hath added the sanction of divine authority. In these respects therefore it is peculiarly the law of our gracious Redeemer. But whether we consider it as a precept of his religion, or as one of the primitive dictates of reason and nature: in either view we are bound to pay it a conscientious regard. And the right manner of shewing this regard is,

I. To form a just notion of its meaning.

II. To fix in our hearts a due sense of its obligation.

III. To consider its importance well.

IV. To regulate our practice by it in the various relations and occurrences of life.

On the three former of these points I shall discourse now: on the last, God willing, the next opportunity.

I. I shall endeavour to assist you in forming a just notion of this rule. Not that it wants explanation, as being obscure and difficult: but that mankind, in order to excuse their disobedience to it, are very apt to put false interpretations upon it; and so either pervert it into a wrong direction, or perplex it till it becomes none at all.

Some men, if we may judge by their conduct, apprehend themselves bound only to behave towards others, as they are willing others should behave towards them in their present condition. The rich and great, for example, have perhaps no favours to ask of a considerable part of their inferiors: and therefore too often seem to think, they need not bestow any favours upon them. They agree, they say, to the reasonableness of doing as they would be done by: and therefore, if they desire no service from such and such persons, they owe no service to them. But the rule is, (and they know it is) not, "Treat others as you would wish them to treat you, circumstances
" being

* Tob. iv. 15.

“ being what they are”; but, “ as you would wish them to treat you, circumstances being changed on each side.” This makes a great alteration.

Perhaps they will reply, that they are content, if circumstances ever should change, to receive the treatment, which they give. Therefore they will overlook the poor and needy now; and they allow the world to overlook them, when they become such. They will revenge themselves of their enemies, while they have power; and let them, if ever it comes to their turn, repay the vengeance. But here again, they know in their consciences the rule means, not, that they shall act as they may think, or rather say, they shall be willing to have others act towards them, supposing circumstances *should* change, which they trust they never will: but as they would have them act, supposing circumstances *were* changed. And in that case they would wish for the very kindest behaviour, whatever they may beforehand either pretend or imagine.

But even on the supposition of an actual change, there are people, who can misinterpret this rule in such a manner, as would make the application of it sometimes a most pernicious thing. Every magistrate, were he in the place of the criminal, who appears before him, would wish not to be punished. Every virtuous man, were he a vicious one, would wish to be indulged and assisted in his vices. Every one of us perhaps would be glad, if he could, to have his will on all occasions. Ought we therefore to gratify all the inclinations of others, because we should like to have all our own gratified? Or if not, is not the rule an erroneous one, as implying this? Why according to their different ways of thinking, some will be apt to prefer the former of these opinions, and some the latter. But neither is well grounded. For though indeed a magistrate, were he in the place of the offender, would wish to escape with impunity, yet this is not the only supposition he hath to make. Let him suppose himself also in the place of such, as may be then or afterwards injured by the offender, if he escapes punishment: or of such, as the precedent of his impunity may tempt others to injure: let him reflect, how the rule before us enjoins him to act with regard to these innocent persons, and he will never be misled by whatever tenderness it may seem to enjoin him with regard to the guilty. Again, though if we were in the place of any of our vicious acquaintance, we should be glad to be assisted in our vices; yet suppose we were in the place of

those whom their vices corrupt, or impoverish, or grieve, or make any way miserable; should we then be glad, that other people should assist in bringing this misery upon us? if not, the precept of doing as we would be done by, far from requiring us to give such assistance ourselves, absolutely prohibits it. Serving our friends, when they ought not to be served; and raising those in the world, from partial fondness, who ought not to be raised, passes, I am afraid, too commonly for great good-nature: and is defended, or excused, because it is treating them as we should desire to be treated by them. But then it is treating their worthier competitors, and all such as may suffer by the faults or incapacity of these favourites, which perhaps many, perhaps the public may, it is treating them as we should abhor to be treated. We must therefore understand this rule to mean that we take into our consideration, not barely the parties who appear and press for the benefit of it, but whoever else is concerned, if any be: and *do*, not to one or some only, but *to all men, as we would that they should do to us*.

But here it may possibly be objected again, that if we imagine ourselves to be successively in the situation of different persons, we shall of consequence desire different and contrary things in reference to the same affair: so that behaving towards every one interested in it, as we should, in their circumstances, desire, that they would behave towards us, is impracticable: that therefore on such occasions, which are not rare, the rule is in effect no rule: and that farther, on several others it is a very bad one. For suppose any one to desire of us, what would be hurtful to no third person, but to himself, or to us: must we comply with his desire, because if we were exactly in his stead, we should have the same desire? Certainly not. But then, such cases as these, not only happen in comparison, but seldom, and therefore cannot mislead, or even perplex us often: but when they do happen, instead of overturning the rule, they point out to us a very important limitation of it, which was doubtless originally intended in it, and will secure it from ever being overturned. And this is, that the phrase, *whatsoever ye would*, must not be extended to mean whatever we can possibly wish, but whatever we can equitably and allowably wish. It is to be understood of proper, not of unfit inclinations; for
 what

what we are forbidden to desire, we are deemed in this precept not to desire.

The full and distinct purport of it then, the sense in which all the world understand it, excepting when they have a mind to misunderstand it, is; "whatever treatment you should on cool deliberation think you had reasonable ground to claim or hope from each person concerned in the affair before you, were he now in your condition and you in his, be that which you give him no less honest and kind."

II. The meaning of the rule being ascertained, the next point is to fix in our hearts a due sense of its obligation.

Now the proof of its obligation lies in a very small compass, which is one great recommendation of it: and therefore I shall spend much fewer words upon it, than a separate head of discourse usually requires. Most evidently, in whatever manner it is fit to treat any person in any circumstances, it is fit to treat in the like manner any other person, supposing him in all the same circumstances: for he is in regard to every consideration of duty, as it were, the same person. There is no need then of saying (what yet is very true, and would if it were wanted, be very material) that all men are absolutely equal in many things, nearly equal in most*; that in whatever they are unequal, the inequality is of very uncertain duration, and by no means always acknowledged: (for scarce any one upon the whole would willingly be any person else, that could be named to him :) and therefore we ought to act towards each other, for the greatest part entirely, and always nearly, as being on the level; and if we do not, those with whom we have concerns, and society in general, will never be easy and happy. Such reflections go somewhat beyond, or fall somewhat wide of what is needful to establish the precept in question: which only requires this very brief and plain demonstration of its justness, indeed so brief and plain, as hardly to need being given in form: that wherever the case is in all respects the same, (as in order to make use of this rule we must in the first place imagine it to be) there the right behaviour must be the same too: and whether it be one person or another, I or my neighbour, who is really in that case, makes no difference in the answer to the question, what the behaviour should be. This cannot be denied, and therefore

* Nihil enim est unum uni tam simile, tam par, quam omnes inter nosmet ipsos sumus. Cic. de Leg. i. 10.

therefore ought not to be forgotten, or overlooked. For whatever is true, and relates to our practice, we feel ourselves bound by nature to observe in our practice. And the God of nature, who hath made us and every thing what we are, must expect us to act suitably to what he hath made us : and if that were not enough to determine our judgment, he hath farther told us expressly by his beloved Son, that he expects us to live with one another according to this rule. Nor, (which completes our obligation) hath he left us any room to doubt, but that in every thing as we obey or disobey, he will reward or punish : and certainly in a greater or smaller degree, as the matter is more or less important. Let us therefore now,

III. Consider well the importance of the precept before us.

Indeed the stamp of divine authority upon it, especially joined with the annexed declaration, that it contains the substance of all that *the law and prophets* have taught concerning our mutual behaviour, may fully assure us, even before we make any particular enquiry, that its moment is remarkably great. And yet there seems to lie a plausible objection against it : that as it only enjoins men to do to others what they see would be right for others to do to them ; the question still remains, what that right part is : that where this is known, the rule of the text is needless ; and where it is not known, we have no more direction for our conduct, than we had before ; but are only perplexed with an imaginary change of persons to no purpose.

Now it must be confessed, that if we had neither by nature nor by revelation any sense or knowledge at all of right and wrong in particular cases, this rule could not give us any ; nor could we understand it any otherwise, than very grossly and imperfectly : but still it would be of some, and no small use to us. For if we knew nothing else, at least we should know what we desired : we should know too, that in the main we were all alike ; and by treating each other as we merely wished (without considering how reasonably) to be treated in return, we should for the most part do tolerably well ; please those around us, and make ourselves easy. Sometimes indeed, for want of distinguishing what wishes were fit, and what unfit, we should act extremely ill : but in comparison perhaps not very often. And upon the whole, where we had no particular precepts, this general one would be the best that we could follow, even though we could not apprehend its full import.

But

But the delivery of it to us presupposes, and very justly, that in the main the contrary is true: that all mankind perceive, in some good degree, one sort of behaviour to be commendable, another blameable: some things right to be done, others wrong. And hence arises, instead of an objection, the principal use of our Saviour's rule. For it enables us to apply these perceptions, where otherwise we should not know how; and inclines us to apply them justly, where otherwise we should have misapplied them.

Though we every one of us have the perceptions, yet to form distinct notions of the proper measures and objects of them; to discover, how far they are mere conclusions of the understanding; and how far dictates of passions or affections, which ought to be corrected and moderated by the understanding: to make a rational examination of the several interfering circumstances of a case, and judge in that manner how we are to be moved, and how to act; is a work, for which the bulk of mankind is totally unqualified. The different opinions entertained by speculative inquirers concerning the precise nature, foundation, limits of moral obligation, run into niceties, that are altogether beyond common apprehension. And of those, who can be amused with them, few, if any, have skill to proceed upon them in the ordinary affairs of life. The great thing, therefore, which the world needs for practice, is, not a complete system of virtue, regularly drawn out and strictly demonstrated: but a familiar palpable instruction, what people are to do in such matters, as chiefly come before them. Now the rule of the text will instruct them, without studying the theory and grounds of virtuous affection at all, to shew such affection notwithstanding, when it is requisite; and to conduct as they should what they are concerned in, without troubling themselves about refinements, which they may never be concerned in. Seriously asking ourselves, and waiting for a serious answer from within, how we should think it reasonable for others to behave towards us in the business, in which we must behave one way or another towards them, will excite in us a very peculiar kind of attention to it; will awaken our faculties to judge of this question with much more certainty, than we could of the more abstracted ones, upon which the philosophical solution of it may depend; and throw a strong light on the point before us, how little soever we may discern in relation to others, with

with which perhaps it is closely connected. At least it will cause us to feel experimentally what we ought to do, whether we see it speculatively, or not.

But farther, the observation of this precept will not only set our minds to work upon the subject, (and yet many want that to be done for them;) but, which is a greater benefit still, will singularly preserve them from working unfairly. The love, that we bear to ourselves, our zeal for the persons and things which we like, and our vehemence against those which we dislike, hinder us perpetually from discovering what is our duty, where else it would be most evident; and constitute our principal danger of judging amiss. Now, if there can be in the world a method of securing us against this danger, our Saviour's rule is that method. Viewing only one face of an object is apt to deceive us: therefore we are directed to view it on the reverse too. Considering a case as our own gives us a bias: suppose then the contrary to be our own; and our second thoughts will correct the first. Self-love is what usually carries us wrong: but the rule prescribed us converts that very passion into an instrument of setting us right: by placing in their turns, before our eyes, two selfs to decide between, (if the expression may be allowed) the real and the fictitious one. The appearances of reason, which arise from the circumstances favourable to our own side, engross our attention: let imagination therefore change the side, and we shall attend to the opposite appearances. The inward feelings, which we have of our own interest, our own honour, our own sufferings, of whatever relates to ourselves, are so very strong, that we quite forget, how the same feelings affect the other party. But this admirable contrivance of a feigned experience enables and obliges us to see for each party successively, and thus to become impartial judges. Farther than this we cannot go in combating selfish prejudices, and therefore a more perfect direction than this cannot be given.

But, besides being a most excellent and obvious rule to guide and try ourselves by, it is likewise a most natural and easy one for others, friends or opposers, to suggest to us: who thus, one should think, might immediately shame us into doing right, only by putting a question to our consciences, which is altogether inoffensive, and yet must produce, if we are guilty, unavoidable conviction.

But

But here indeed it must be acknowledged, that some people, especially at times, are wicked and wild enough to reject, with indignation, even the most respectful proposals of their trying a case by any law, but their own will and pleasure: and that others may pretend to have made in their thoughts this change of persons, which our Lord enjoins, and yet not have made it in earnest. They may say, (for it is very soon said,) that they have already sufficiently examined the matter; and should be well content to receive the treatment, which they propose to give: that they cannot but know, whether they have consulted and answered themselves, and they are under no obligation to consult or answer any one else: the rule recommended to them makes every man his own judge, and they have judged accordingly, as well as they are able, and are very clear in their sentiments. Now undoubtedly every one, that will, may assert this, or any thing, falsely. And it is very true, that the direction in the text is of no manner of use, as none can be, to those who are absolutely resolved not to be directed. But such, as have any fairness of heart remaining, let them be otherwise ever so far gone at any time in unreasonableness, may possibly still be brought to themselves, by having it put home to them; "Would you really be willing, that others, if they had power, should determine concerning you, in the same haughty and careless, or the same angry and vehement disposition, which you now shew concerning them?" You say you would: but is it not in order to maintain your ground any how, when you are pressed? For your own sake, as well as your neighbours, deal fairly with yourself: and remember, that God sees infallibly, whether you do; nay, that men will guess, and seldom err. If you are cool, search whether interest or contempt or indolence do not secretly warp your judgment; and think, whether they ought. If you are warm, first compose your heart, and then consult it. Wait without acting, till the tempest is over; and when you hear within you the *small still voice**, that follows, be assured that then, and not before, God and your conscience speak to you, and tell you what you should do. But were such remonstrances to prove ever so vain, it would be no just objection against the usefulness of the rule. For if the proud, or covetous, or thoughtless, or

VOL. I.

M

passionate,

* 1 Kings xix. 12, &c.

passionate, will not apply it fairly; much less will they apply any other. And if they could be persuaded to apply it, as none have so much need of it, none would receive so much advantage from it.

But a farther objection may be, that not only some cannot be induced to make trial of this change of persons; but others, who in all appearance make it as well as they can, do not succeed in it: but either draw wrong conclusions, or know not how to draw any. Yet surely in general, if ever there was a precept, that required little time and pains to comprehend and practise it, such is that before us. *The commandment, which I command thee this day, is not hidden from thee, neither far off: but the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it* *. Still some attention and care is requisite in every thing. And one point, to which we should attend with very great care, is in asking the question, "would we be treated thus," to lay aside, as much as possible, out of our thoughts, that the answer given to it is immediately to be turned the other way. Unless we do this, it may be feared, we shall seldom answer honestly; at least, unless we diligently recollect at the same time, that where doing right is most contrary to our present interest or inclination, it will contribute most to our present honour and peace of conscience, and to our future and final happiness. Another very needful caution is, that in order to find, what our judgment would be, were all circumstances changed, we must be sure to leave out no circumstances that are material, in favour of the opposite side. Most of them indeed will flow into our mind of themselves, provided it be fairly opened to them. However, we must honestly seek for the remainder, nay suppose them, if we have reason, though they do not appear; dwell upon each of them so as to feel its proper force, and then determine.

But here one plea more may be alledged: that sometimes men cannot reckon up all circumstances, and therefore cannot place themselves in the condition of the other: they know it not sufficiently to say, what they should think, if they were in it. Why this, it must be owned, doth happen. And tho' we may pretend ignorance falsely, to excuse ourselves from trying what we foresee would go against us: yet they must be very partial or very inconsiderate, who are not frequently

sensible

sensible, that they want knowledge of facts, or skill to judge concerning them: or at least have cause to doubt, whether the opinion, that seems to them the most likely, be indeed the true one. But even here our Saviour's rule will be of great service. For if we endeavour to make use of it, and find we cannot with any certainty; we shall at least be strongly reminded of our own fallibility: and our doubt in determining which is in strictness the right part, will direct us, without any doubt, to take the mild, the gentle, the good-natured part, as being the safest error, should it prove one. However, there are methods of assisting our judgments considerably. If we have formerly been in the condition, in which we now desire to place ourselves; we must recollect, what we thought then. If we know any wise and good persons, who are in that condition at present; we must observe or inquire, what they think and presume, that we should think like them, were we situated like them. The general persuasion of mankind should always have more than a little weight with us, where it is not evidently wrong. And most of us have great need, in supposing that the contrary case was ours, to make large allowances for its not being really ours, and therefore not striking us near so strongly, as that which is.

By the help of such precautions as these, duly observed, we should so very seldom either mistake, or hesitate, in the use of the precept before us, that every day would afford us new proof of our Lord's declaration concerning it: *This is the law and the prophets*: to which one of the oldest and most eminent of the Jewish doctors* approached very nearly, when he said, *This is the law: the rest is the explication of it*. But here it cannot be meant, that by this method we are to learn our duty either to God, with whom it would be shocking irreverence to suppose a change of persons: or to ourselves, where there is no other person to change with; but merely to our fellow-creatures. And our Saviour, who hath elsewhere told us that the love of our Maker *is the first and great commandment*†, and hath enjoined the strictest moral government of those inclinations which are confined the most

M 2

intirely

* R. Hillel, the elder, said to live about the time of Christ. This saying is cited from the Talmudic tract, intituled, Schabbath, by Vorst. de Ad. NT. c. 10. & Otho Lex. Rabb. in *Odium*.

† Matth. xxii. 38.

intirely within our own breasts, could never intend to tell us in the text, that right behaviour to our neighbour was the sole thing about which we need be solicitous. And therefore he could only design to say, that this rule would point out to us the whole of what heaven required of us, respecting that behaviour. Just as if, in common life, we were told on any occasion, "This is all that you have to do;" we must apprehend the words, however general, to signify, all that belonged to the point, which was then in the mind of the person who spoke; not all that belonged to other points, about which, at that instant, he had no thoughts of speaking.

And that, by means of this one precept, we may steer with innocence through all the dangers of social life, I hope you have sufficiently seen cause to believe, though a fuller examination into particulars will give you fuller satisfaction. It only remains, that we apply it faithfully to that purpose in our continual intercourse with each other, in our daily self-examinations, in the solemn preparations of our hearts for the Lord's supper: begging of God in the appointed gospel manner, that pardon for our many transgressions of this and all his holy laws, and that grace to observe them better for the future, which our failures and weakness render so needful: giving glory to him, and humbly taking comfort to ourselves, when our endeavours have proved successful. These things we must each resolve to practise conscientiously, if we regard either present happiness, or future: if we desire to avoid the bad opinion of those around us, who will unanimously censure our transgression of so plain a rule; the reproaches of our own hearts, of which it is an obvious dictate; or his final condemnation, who *is greater than our hearts, and knoweth all things* *.

* 1 John iii. 20.

S E R M O N IX.

ON EQUITY.

MATT. vii. 12.

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.

THE meaning, obligation, and importance of this precept of our blessed Lord have been already shewn you: and are indeed pretty generally acknowledged. Most men admit, applaud, and urge it to others: the only thing wanting is that, without which all the rest will be nothing, to practise it themselves. This last point therefore I have reserved to insist on separately. There are few indeed, that can bear to transgress a direction so evidently just, with their eyes quite open: and those who can, there is little hope of amending. But many are either too inconsiderate, or too vehement, to think of it, and apply it to their own case, without admonition; who yet may be shewn what is right, though they would not look for it: and bringing home to such, those equitable considerations, which this rule suggests, will be doing for them all we need. It is very true, there is no possibility of going through the whole extent of a commandment, that reaches to every single occurrence, in which we have intercourse one with another; or, in our Saviour's language, *is itself the law and the prophets*. But applying it to the more common circumstances of life, may give, though possibly no new knowledge, yet many seasonable warnings to all, who happen to be in the circumstances which shall be mentioned, and will honestly make use of those plain rules to direct themselves, which shall now be laid before you, to direct whom they may.

Men

Men are to be considered, either, first, as superiors or inferiors, or, secondly, as equals. And the rule of the text points out to all these their proper mutual behaviour. Again, superiors are such, either in authority, or only in rank. And authority is either public or domestic.

Now the conduct of men in any sort of public authority is of so great importance to so many persons, in so many different ways, and they have such variety of temptations, to divert their attention from it, or incline them to a wrong sort of attention; that they cannot ask themselves too seriously, or too often: Is my treatment of all those, whose happiness may be more or less affected by it, the same, which I should reasonably wish for, were I in their condition? At the first view perhaps, punishment seems right to me: but were I in the offenders case, would not forgiveness seem righter? Or tenderness appears an amiable thing; but were I the party injured or endangered, would not justice appear a necessary one? I think myself intitled to such profits, or such leisure: but what should I think, were another to insist on either, and I to suffer by it? Do I consider, in general, how easily my passion, selfishness or partiality, my less voluntary errors, or mere indolent neglects, may distress people in a manner, that I should feel to be most grievous? The station I am in is a trust: Do I discharge it with that diligence and steadiness, that integrity and disinterestedness, that mildness and patience, that sense of human fallibility, that readiness to see and correct my own mistakes, that vigilance to do and encourage whatever is laudable, which I should justly expect from another? Can I say to myself, after a faithful examination, that I only wish a return suitable to my behaviour? And can I say to him, whose servant I am here below, *Think upon me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people**?

But then, at the same time, persons under authority also should ask their hearts, before they accuse those above them of not acting thus: Am I sure, both of my being well informed, how they have acted, and well qualified to judge, how they ought to have acted? May there not possibly be things very worthy of consideration in the case, which I have never reflected upon, perhaps have never had the means of knowing? And how would it fit upon my mind, if my inferiors were to pass a peremptory and severe sentence upon me, without being bet-

ter

* Neh. v. 19.

ter acquainted with the reasons and circumstances of my conduct, than I am with those of the conduct of my superiors? But suppose them in fault, should I be willing to have all my faults exaggerated to the utmost; without any consideration had, how natural it is to commit them, how hard it is to avoid them; without any regard paid to what I had done or meant well? And should I further think it reasonable, that my betters should be attentive solely to the errors of my behaviour, without weighing their own towards me! If not, it behoves me to watch over mine towards them: and promote the welfare of society in the small sphere that belongs to me, leaving others to do it in their larger ones. Nay, were they to mismanage ever so grossly, yet if I contribute, either through resentment, ambition, or inconsiderateness, to make bad worse; I shall treat, if not those whom I suppose to be guilty, yet many whom I know to be innocent, as I should esteem it very wrong for them to treat me.

Thus much of superiors and inferiors in public life. The first private and domestic relation of inequality is that between husbands and wives: with respect to whom our Saviour's rule most evidently directs, that, on one side, the inequality be as obligingly concealed; on the other, as cheerfully acknowledged as possible; and that on both, that fidelity, that agreeableness, that mildness, that prudence, that constant attention to their common interests, temporal and eternal, and those of their joint offspring, be shewn, which each of them hath so very just reason to claim, from the nature of the thing, from the precepts of scripture, from their mutual, deliberate, solemn promises and vows. There is no state, in which the two parties have so painful a sense of the wrongs they suffer; there is none, in which they are so often reminded, one way or other, of the wrongs they do: therefore few words are needful to instruct them how to apply the direction before us; and none can express fully enough their obligation to apply conscientiously; and to search the bottom of their souls, whether they have or not.

The second species of domestic authority is that of parents over their children. Now parents may easily suppose themselves in their childrens condition: for they have been in it. Whatever therefore appeared to you grievous then, and on cool reflection appears so still, you will surely never so much as think

as think of doing; but remember, not only what you underwent; but how wrong it was, that you should. If indeed you have seen the wisdom since of restraints, that you once thought harsh ones; and found cause to be sorry afterwards for indulgencies, with which at the time you were pleased: you must follow your maturer deliberate judgment, not your early rash one; treat your children as you would now be desirous to be treated, were you in their case, not as you did desire during your ignorance; and by no means think it a reason, for exposing them to ruin by dangerous pleasures and amusements, or for condemning them to insignificance by conniving at their idleness, that you were extremely glad to be thus used yourselves. But then, on the other hand, if you are convinced of this, you ought to consider, as impartially as you can, whether you do not carry it too far: whether your present feverish notions be not the effect of prejudices, as natural to riper years, as the opposite ones are to youth: and however certain you are of the contrary, still do your best, to make what is needful for your children easy to them, by telling them the reasons of your proceeding when they can safely be told: and when they cannot, you must give such proofs on other occasions, of judicious tenderness towards them, as may gain their implicit confidence in the fitness of whatever you require; and must not be much offended, if, after all, the obedience, which you receive, be too like that which probably you paid, somewhat unwilling and imperfect. Another duty of parents, which the rule of the text cannot fail of recommending to them, is, making a due and timely provision for the decent subsistence of their children. Either this was done for you, or you strongly felt, that it ought to have been done for you. Which soever was the case, you are inexcusable if through extravagance or indolence you neglect to do it for them: and you are equally so, (for the same plain reason) unless you endeavour with your utmost care and skill, to guard them against all sorts of dangers, and secure to them all sorts of happiness, in the world, into which you have brought them.

But then, children should also think; (and, as they are extremely apt to forget it, should often call upon themselves to think,) were there any one, for whom I had the same anxiety and solicitude, that my parents appear to have for me; and who had the same obligations to me, that I have to my parents: should

should I be willing to have all my kindness received with contempt or indifference; to have that person prefer every fancy of his own to my comfort and peace? Should any one ever be put under my direction, shall I be content, that before he can possibly be capable of judging, he should insist on following his own judgement, and pay no deference to mine? Nay, supposing I had faults, many and great ones, would I in earnest be willing to lose all obedience and respect on account of them? Do I not already, notwithstanding all my faults, expect more regard than a little from those that are younger than myself? Do I not see all parents expect it from their children? All superiors from their inferiors? And shall I not most certainly think hereafter, as they do? Why should not my actions therefore now be suitable to what my sentiments will be then?

A third relation in domestic life is that between masters and servants. Now is it not exceeding natural for each of the former to ask himself, Were I a servant, as I might have been, should I hold it reasonable to be treated roughly and haughtily, to be blamed or suspected without cause, to have every fault aggravated and treasured up for ever, and little notice taken of my behaving ever so well; to have immoderate labour or attendance exacted, or what is fitting in any kind, withheld, or what is due for my service detained from me; to be neglected in sickness or old age, to be exposed without redress to injuries from my fellow-servants; to have no instruction in my duty given me; perhaps no opportunity afforded me of learning those great truths of religion, which are the best direction and support through this life, and the only means of being happy for ever in a better? If I should think, and justly think, myself intitled to receive the reverse of this usage, let me be sure to give it; and study to make that subjection, which cannot be a very pleasing state, as tolerable as can be to those who are in it; for mine would be a very intolerable one, were there none such.

And surely, on the other hand, all servants, in whatever stations, ought to ask their hearts with equal fairness: Would it seem to me fit, were I a master, that my servant should be dishonest or undutiful, quarrelsome or disorderly, negligent or wasteful in my family, when I had covenanted with him for the contrary good qualities, and was bound to pay him a valuable consideration for them? Would I be willing, he should

betray my secrets, hurt my reputation, corrupt my children; or any way prove my enemy, when I had brought him under my roof to be my friend? Would I be content, he should quit me without reasonable notice; or bear nothing from me, who perhaps must bear much from him; murmur at every inconvenience, and appear sensible of no advantages? If not; what I should require, that let me do.

But I proceed now to superiors, not in authority, but in rank only; on account of some one or more of the various pre-eminences, that raise men one above another. For these also, and their respective inferiors, have great need to form their conduct first, and try it ever after, by this excellent rule.

They who challenge reverence on account of their years, ought frequently to reflect, how ill they would digest, were they young, that assuming carriage, which they sometimes use: how unjust they would deem it to be treated penuriously and rigidly; to be condemned, and it may be, cast off, for mere indiscretions, or even a few grosser faults. But then young people, in their turn, cannot consider too much, and very seldom consider nearly enough, how bitter it would be to them were they already in years, how bitter it will be to them, when that time comes, to have their experience and wisdom slighted, and be objects of dislike and ridicule to every raw and thoughtless creature, perhaps for those very things, which ought to procure them honour and love.

Again, persons of superior quality or wealth should bring themselves down in their imaginations to the middle and lower condition of life: consult their breasts, what degree of respect they would like to pay those above them; what sorts of condescension and subserviency they would think it hard to have exacted from them; what claims of privilege they would judge oppressive and injurious: and let the feelings, which they will thus acquire, and which perhaps will be new to them, regulate their conduct. They should examine well what the real state of the industrious, the needy, the helpless part of the world often is; then place themselves in it a while; and they would have a strong sense, how criminal it must be in any way to increase their difficulties, how requisite in every way to lessen them. But at the same time, meaner persons also have full as much occasion to consider, how grievous they would find it, were they in higher stations, to be defrauded and imposed on,

how

how provoking to be complained of without cause, how irksome to be teized with unreasonable requests and expectations; and what a shocking thing it is for them to use such insolence towards their betters as they would think insupportable, should even their betters use it towards them.

A third sort of pre-eminence without authority, is that which arises from personal accomplishments of mind or body. And here again the rule most clearly directs those who excell, never to be contemptuous or ostentatious; and those who are deficient, never to give offence by unequal competitions, or marks of envy; for each would account them extremely injurious, were he in the other's place. But let us now go on to the

IId. General head, the influence of this precept, where persons are equal, or however may be considered as such. And these are chiefly, either near relations, friends, and intimates, or such as have occasional intercourse, in business, in conversation, in matters of party dispute, civil or religious, in subjects of private offence and resentment, in cases that call for good-nature and compassion.

Near relations always claim peculiar affection and regard, but too seldom pay it. Negligence, ill-temper, emulation, mutual jealousy in point of interest or favour, alienate and sour their minds: and each complains of the rest, because none will apply our Saviour's direction to search and reform himself. Intimacies, and what people call friendships, are on the same account perpetually liable to be broken off by disgusts, frequently very groundless ones; and while they last, are very commonly, either insincere and treacherous, or by wrong partialities and compliances dangerous and pernicious: all which things the plain question, "would it be right, that we should be treated, as we treat others?" might easily prevent. But I proceed to those, who have only occasional intercourse.

In business, every one would think it hard, even to be obstructed and delayed, much more to be over-reached, or oppressed: whether by taking advantages of law against common justice, or of his necessity, his ignorance, his mistake, his inadvertence, his forgetfulness, or any other way. Every one would be willing to make a reasonable profit of his labour, his goods, or his skill; and unwilling to allow another more than is reasonable. E-

very one would expect from his creditor all due forbearance; and more than common forbearance, when circumstances required it. Every one would expect, that they should not become his debtors, who have no prospect of paying; and that they, who, if they will take proper measures for it, can pay, should do it within the time promised. Every one would claim to have proper notice taken of his interests and pretensions, as well as those of other people; nay indeed to have some regard, where there is room for it, paid to his bare inclinations. *Therefore all things, whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye unto them.* To use even those unfairly, who have used us so, is very bad: but to use any one unfairly, because another hath used us so, is what, were we to suffer such usage, we should think monstrously wicked. You will say perhaps, we shall be undone, if we confine ourselves to act, as we may indeed reasonably wish, but shall wish to no manner of purpose, that others would act; and therefore we must do as they do, not as we would in vain have them do. But consider. Our blessed Saviour, you may be sure, foresaw this objection: and yet doth he allow, that, to secure ourselves, we should violate the integrity we owe to our fellow-creatures? No: but only bids us join discretion with it. *Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves**. It is very true, innocence without prudence will not do for this world: but prudence without innocence will not do for the next; nor always even for this; in which probably more men of abilities have ruined themselves by adventuring into crooked paths, than weak men have by keeping to the straight one. But to proceed,

In common conversation, you certainly expect civility and decent complaisance; be careful to shew it then: you would not be overborne; be not overbearing: you would have what you say or do received with candour: receive in the same manner what the rest of the company say or do. You would be very unwilling to hear those, whom you respect, unhandsomely spoken of: therefore speak unhandsomely of no one, whom it is possible any other person may respect. And remember, there are persons who respect religion and virtue: and feel as much uneasiness at profane or indecent discourse, as you can feel



* Matth. x. 6.

feel when your best friends are slandered. Again: you would desire, that when any thing is mentioned, which can effect your character, it should be placed in the most favourable light. Place therefore in the same whatever may affect the character of any one else. And even if you are not so tender about reputation; yet recollect, that the people, of whom you are discoursing, may: behave therefore as you would wish them to do, if you had the same sensibility that they have. You are tempted perhaps to take liberties in talk, because you have a talent for satire and ridicule. But how would you wish others to exercise this talent with respect to you, if they had it, and you not? Should you deserve to be made odious or contemptible, merely because they had wit. But your motive, it may be, is of a higher kind. You have a zeal against wickedness and folly. Why, shew it then in promoting virtue and wisdom, and all will be well. But passing hasty censures, and spreading bad reports, possibly with little or no foundation, is a strange method of being zealous for what is good; and a most unrighteous one you would think it, were the case your own. Or supposing that the fault, about which you are so vehement, is but too certain: were you never guilty of any, were you never in danger of any? And would it have been well done to expose you for it to the utmost? Might it not have you made desperate, instead of reforming you? How much more rational, as well as humane, is the apostle's injunction to *speake evil of no man, but shew all meekness unto all men; for, saith he, we ourselves were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived**. Our religion, (and it is greatly to its honour) commands us to be strict in our own conduct, yet gentle in our remarks on that of others: and its professors are too often the reverse; loose in their principles and practices, bitter in their reflections. Yet still such freedoms in discourse, when they are taken, not with design to do harm, but through mere inconsiderateness, ought not to be much resented; because most men must be conscious, that they are too apt to take the same: for which they would undoubtedly think it hard not to be pardoned. And, above all, they who know that their behaviour hath given ground for censure, ought to bear it very patiently, as what they have deserved.

For

* Tit. iii. 2, 3.

For so they would judge others under the same circumstances ought to do, both in point of justice and of prudence.

Another occasion, on which dreadful injuries, both in word and deed, are sadly frequent, is that of disputes and contentions, religious and civil. For the mildness and love, which both our common nature and common christianity dictate, is not only transgressed in these cases by many without perceiving it, but some imagine the utmost vehemence a duty; and defend it, by saying directly, that were it possibly for them to be as bad as their adversaries are, they should think no usage too severe.

But must you not think it too severe, to have it taken for granted you were thus bad; to have every random assertion to your disadvantage immediately believed; and a share of every ill thing, that any one of the same denomination had done, imputed to you: to have men work up their own passions against you to any height without reason, or follow the common cry of their side, or the fashionable one of the times, without consideration? Surely you ought to consider well, how you should like to have the sect or party, the profession or body of men, that you were of, pointed out to be run down thus, right or wrong. And in general it ought to be considered well, by those, who have power, what forbearance and moderation they should claim, were others in power; by those who are weakest, what freedoms they would account unfit to be taken with them, if they were the strongest; and by all persons, what they would reckon allowable and fair in their opposers, what on the contrary dishonourable and criminal.

But I go on from these more public altercations to that with which they are closely connected, matters of private displeasure and offence. You make no scruple perhaps of doing what must naturally disoblige and provoke others; but without regard to that, pursue your own interest, or indulge your own humour. Now would you indeed be well pleased, that the rest of the world should be as regardless of your inclination or convenience? You apprehend yourself injured, and resolve instantly on revenge, to the extent of your ability. But could you possibly think it right, that the anger of another, (and your own is just as blind) should be left without control to determine whether and how far you had done wrong, and what return it deserved: that he should be judge and executioner in his own cause, and perhaps not take a moment to cool first? You feel

feel by having received an injury how very bad a thing it is to do one. Recollect then: Returning one is doing one; is doing it designedly too, with that single mischievous intention: Whereas in all likelihood the person, at whom you are so exasperated, meant much more to serve or gratify himself, than to hurt you, if he meant the latter at all. Or whatever his intentions were, you have both a precept of scripture to direct you on the occasion, and a promise of scripture to indemnify you. *Say not, I will do to him, as he hath done to me; I will render to the man according to his work*. Say not, I will recompense evil: but wait on the Lord, and he shall save thee†.* If then you take the opposite course, you reject what God hath expressly appointed to be your rule; you chuse instead of it, what he hath expressly forbidden to be your rule; you put yourself from under the protection of his providence, and knowingly expose yourself to his heaviest displeasure. But you will say, If we may not revenge ourselves, we may surely resolve to have nothing more to do with the man who hath injured us; and look on all obligations of kindness to him, as cancelled. Now here again consider: Would it be reasonable, if you had once, or more than once, behaved to any one as you ought not, that therefore you should be rejected for ever? Might not you regain in time a title even to friendship and confidence? Might not you from the first be a fit object of lower marks of favour? Or supposing you did not deserve them, might it not be very laudable and right to treat you better, than you deserved? Do not you hope to be treated thus, on many occasions by men, and in the important concern of your future happiness by God himself? whose mercy you dare ask for on no other terms, than those of being forgiven, as you forgive. If therefore the forgiveness, which you beg, includes bounty and gracious notice; let that, which you grant, do so likewise, in a proper degree; and imitate the goodness, which otherwise you will pray for in vain. Observe but in what manner our Saviour hath in St. *Luke* connected the precept before us, with that of pardoning injuries. *As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise—Love your enemies and do good, and ye shall be the children of the highest: for he is kind to the unthankful and the evil. Be ye therefore*

* Prov. xxiv. 29.

† Prov. xx. 22.

*merciful, as your Father also is merciful**. But at least, you will say, proper submission may be required first. Why undoubtedly it may. And he, who hath done the wrong, should always consider, whether, if he had received it, the satisfaction, which he deems it beneath him to give, would not have appeared very necessary for him to claim. But then at the same time, you who have received the wrong, should consider too, whether if you had done it, you could have yielded to the rigorous terms and debasing compliances which you exact: nay, would not have thought it very hard, that such, as might be in strictness due, should be without abatement insisted on.

Another situation, requisite to be mentioned, in which we are strangely apt to violate our Saviour's rule, is, when connexions or circumstances call us to shew courtesy, love, or pity. Very commonly we have scarce any attention to return the obliging behaviour, which we absolutely expect: give mighty small proofs of affection, even where we should be miserable, if the greatest were not given us; and hardly express the least compassion to the afflicted, whereas we should look for all possible assiduity of tenderness, were we in their condition. Or if even our strength of mind were such as not to need support; we ought surely to ask ourselves, what we should justly wish for, had we less strength, as others may. But instead of being moved by that consideration to a friendly sympathy, we can persecute the wretched with unreasonable harsh maxims of impracticable wisdom; nay, perhaps imbitter their sorrows with groundless or immoderate reproaches, when the justest and the gentlest reproofs would be ill-timed and hard-hearted. What feelings the persons thus treated must have, and consequently what our own under the same treatment would be, is incomparably set forth in those words of Job, *I also could speak as ye do: if your soul were in my soul's stead, I could heap up words, and shake my head at you. But I would strengthen you with my mouth; and the moving of my lips should assuage your grief**. This therefore is our duty: for this would assuredly be our desire. But then, as they, who are not in affliction, should think, if they were, with what kindness they should expect to be attended and regarded; so they who are, should think in return, if it had fallen to their lot to pay this at-
dance

* Luke vi. 31, 35, 36.

† Job xvi. 4, 5.

dance and regard, what patience and reasonableness they should have expected from those to whom they paid it; and what thankful acknowledgments, for discharging an office but tolerably well, which must be in itself a melancholy and unpleasing one.

There are some, and I hope the more usual, of the numberless cases, in which we should all be solicitously careful to *do to others, as we would they should do to us*. Indeed were we to aim at taking one step further, and a little exceed the goodness, which we conceive we might equitably demand, we should seldom go beyond the rule, but only make somewhat surer not to fall short of it: a point, of which it concerns us in the highest degree to make sure. For when God is so gracious as to appeal to our hearts, and govern us by a law, as it were, of our own enacting: (a law which we cannot be ignorant of, cannot except against, and one should think can hardly forget or misapply;) we must be dreadfully inexcusable before him, when we disobey it. Indeed the general disobedience to it which there is in the world, affords us a deplorable view of the state of mankind; and should excite us to a strict examination of our past, and a diligent watchfulness over our future conduct. We have all transgressed even this most obvious and unexceptionable rule: let us all beg that pardon, which our Saviour hath merited. for what we have done ill; and apply for that grace of the Holy Spirit, without the help of which we can do nothing well.

S E R M O N X.

ON CHARITY.

1 PETER iv. 8.

*And above all things, have fervent charity among yourselves :
for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.*

A RELIGION, the precepts of which are all just and good, must immediately be acknowledged to be so far true ; but if, besides, the general temper from which it appoints every particular duty to be done, be the proper and right one, then the argument in its favour strengthens. And if, lastly, the means which it prescribes to form this temper, be well adapted to produce it in the worst of men, and raise it still higher in the best, nothing more can be wanting to prove the practical part of such an institution, which is always the most important part, worthy of him, who alone perfectly knows both the obligations arising from our original nature, and the assistances needful in our present circumstances.

Now this is evidently the case of Christianity. Its injunctions comprehend every dictate, the very purest and sublimest, of natural piety and virtue, without any single article contradictory to them : whereas all religions of human invention have both omitted right things, and commanded wrong ones. The precepts it hath added, peculiar to itself, are few and unexceptionable. And the motives from which the whole is to be practised, are two, the most rational and excellent that can be conceived : *the first and great commandment, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart ; and the second like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself* * : both which have
one

* Matth. xxii. 37, 38, 39.

one original source; that inward esteem of moral goodness and rectitude, which must incline us to adore it in our Maker, cultivate it in ourselves, and exercise it towards our fellow-creatures.

This is the genuine spirit of the gospel: and it is plainly the worthiest and noblest that our nature, or any nature, is capable of: too noble, indeed, for human minds, weak and depraved as they are, to be wholly influenced by at first. And therefore we are trained up to it gradually, by a preparatory discipline of threatenings to restrain, and promises to excite us; of religious appointments to remind us of our duty, visible signs to make stronger impressions of it, worldly trials of many kinds to exercise and confirm us in it; till, through a course of this improving education, we grow up to our maturity; and *that which is perfect being come, that which is in part be done away* *. Then God in his own good time shall translate us into a better world, and removing, as superfluous, now, those temporary aids, which, in some degree, obscured the building they contributed to raise, its beauty shall appear complete, and its duration eternal.

Therefore, in every act, and every thought of religion, we should always remember, that the only true measure of our improvement, is the increase of that virtuous affection, which St. Paul hath declared to be *the end of the commandment* †, love to God, and love to his whole creation, especially our own species, or as large a proportion of it as our behaviour can affect. The former part of this blessed temper, that which regards our Maker, hath been taught so unintelligibly, and perverted so wildly, by some, and, partly in consequence of that, rejected with such scorn, or admitted with such diffidence, by others; that to the great disadvantage and dishonour of religion, it hath obtained but little place in the souls of men, even of those who think themselves pious and devout. And yet, if goodness be the natural object of love, and infinite goodness of the highest love that we can exert, surely the meaning of love to God is as plain, and the obligation to it as indispensable, as the feeling of it is delightful, and the fruits excellent.

Love to our fellow-creatures, the second precept of our blessed Lord, which in the text is rendered *charity*, the original

O 2

word

* 2 Cor. xiii. 10.

† 1 Tim. i. 5.

word being the very same, hath indeed so far escaped better than the first, as to be in general terms well spoken of by all the world. But, at the same time, its nature hath often been ill understood; and its worth seldom considered near enough, yet sometimes exalted a great deal too much.

For these reasons, I shall endeavour,

I. To settle the right notion of this virtue.

II. To shew the just value of it: particularly its influence in what both *St. Peter* and *St. James* ascribe to it, *covering of sins*.

I. To settle the right notion of it: a thing the more necessary, because the word, by which it is here expressed, hath greatly altered its meaning. Charity, in common speech at present, almost constantly signifies, either judging favourably of the actions and intentions of others, or relieving their distresses: whereas, in the New Testament, it never signifies these particularly, and scarce ever any single virtue, but that general benevolence of disposition, which prompts us, on all occasions, to mild thoughts and beneficent deeds; and on which, wrought in us by the grace of our Redeemer, depends their true worth and acceptance with God. For this reason, *St. Paul* very justly supposes a case possible, which else might well seem a very strange one, that of a man's bestowing all he hath to feed the poor, and not having charity; for he may only have vanity or ambition; and as justly determines upon it, that such liberality shall *profit him nothing* *. Charity, therefore, is an inward principle of universal kind affection: and the seeds of it are sown in that constitutional goodness of nature, of which, notwithstanding our lamentable degeneracy by the fall, every man hath some remaining degree; the larger the happier, if we manage it with due care. For in this, as in every part of our frame, watchful conduct and judicious culture of our powers and propensities, promoting their growth in some instances, restraining it in others, and directing it in all, is highly necessary to their attaining maturity, and bringing forth valuable fruit. When properly regulated, the most terrible of our passions, anger, becomes the minister of good; and, when left to run wild, the most amiable of our inward feelings, good-nature, is often almost wholly useless, and sometimes the parent of much evil.

Thus,

* 1 Cor. xiii. 3.

Thus, to say nothing of those whose pretences to it are mere affectation, who extoll benevolence to the skies in talk, but give no proof of it in any thing beyond talk : the good-nature of some, who have a sort of it, is intirely notional and romantic. They can be affected most deeply by a moving story ; weep over even a feigned distress, when well described, or barely represented to them by fancy ; and perhaps weep a second time at reflecting on their own meritorious tenderness : yet, in real cases that come before them, can see the heaviest afflictions without being moved ; nay, can even produce them with a most unrelenting steadiness, when their pleasures, or interests, or favourite schemes, require it. And thus they cultivate, in idea, the most refined and exalted sentiments of humanity, which no one living is ever the better for.

Some again are a little more in earnest than this comes to : but so very little, that, instead of *fervent charity*, it amounts to no more than languid ineffectual good-will. They wish well, it may be, to all the world : applaud others highly, when they relieve the distressed ; approve it, are sincerely glad of it ; will, on occasion, solicit and press them to it : but if they themselves are called upon to do likewise, know not how to part with any thing worth naming, be they possessed of ever so great superfluity ; and have a thousand reasons to alledge, why they cannot, or need not do, what most evidently they both can and ought.

Another sort of persons will give their money freely enough : for they have no regard to money. But if they are wanted to bestow a little pains or contrivance towards extricating any one out of difficulties, that is too hard a task, though it would do ever so much good. To think of the distress of a fellow-creature is grievous to them ; but to set about helping him would be more so : and therefore, instead of condemning and throwing off their indolence, they turn their eyes another way to make themselves easy, and let every thing grow as much worse as it can.

The goodness of a fourth sort is very warm, but extremely short-lived. They will promise wonders, and mean all they say ; but forget it in a day's time : and just then would do every thing for a man, whom in their next turn of humour they will do nothing for. So that, till they are known, they
mislead

mislead and disappoint almost as many, as they undertake to serve.

Another very blameable kind of good-nature is a partial one. That principle must evidently be planted in us for the benefit of all without exception: and yet we most of us, it may be feared, either openly or secretly, except multitudes. The very gospel of *Christ*, that was designed to establish universal charity, hath been dreadfully perverted to destroy it: and the doctrine of love abused, to excite in men the bitterest hatred to every persuasion but their own. Nor have they, who profess the greatest abhorrence of such practices, by any means been free from a very ill-natured zeal against religion, while they have censured most vehemently that kind of zeal for it. But in the affairs of civil and common life, many, that on some occasions have the easiest and mildest tempers, on others, preserve no temper at all. Sometimes the spirit of party takes such possession of very well-meaning men, that they abominate one half of the world round them, it may be for they do not well know what. Sometimes again the most humane creature upon earth to those whom he happens to like, entertains and delights them with the keenest satire and ridicule on such, as he or they happen to dislike, or barely to consider with indifference. The agreeableness of not a few, who have a great deal, is almost intirely lavished on mere common acquaintance: while those nearer friends at home, who are intitled to the largest share of their good-humour and regard, experience continually their peevishness or neglect. And on the contrary, others are so tenderly and immoderately fond of one or more bosom favourites, that they applaud themselves, and, to be sure, are applauded by these at least, as the best and worthiest of mankind: yet will slight most contemptuously all but such dear friends; and injure most unmercifully every one else, that stands in the way of them: nay perhaps too, must as constantly have some persons to hate without cause, as others to love without merit. From a foresight of this danger it probably was, that our blessed Saviour, though he had recommended private friendship by his example, enjoined it by no precept; as well knowing, that a proper degree of general goodwill would seldom fail to unite men as closely, as was requisite for their own benefit, or consistent with that of others.

But still, an undistinguishing good-nature may be full as bad

as a partial one. Too often the inconsiderate, or indolent, give themselves up a prey to whoever lays hold on them. Confident forwardness prevails upon some: a talent for entertaining and diverting them takes with others, abject flattery with a third sort, and little officiousnesses, well-chosen and well-timed, with a fourth. By such as excell in these arts only, they suffer their whole stock of beneficence to be exhausted: and never take the trouble of thinking, how very much better it might be employed: by which means they at once give the worthy the uneasiness of seeing themselves overlooked, and raise the unworthy to a capacity of doing harm.

Nay indeed, when they have done harm, and been guilty of pernicious crimes, there is a false tenderness in many, that makes them unwilling to have past misdemeanors punished, so as may be likely to prevent future ones. They have no compassion for human society, and nothing but compassion for the disturbers of it. To say the truth, some will shew a kind regard to bad characters, which they will shew to none else: and do more to assist the most profligate wretches, under the difficulties and dangers that their profligateness hath brought them into, without either design or desire of reforming them, than they would to supply the most pitiable necessities of an innocent person or family. Now this preferring such before others, in acts of beneficence, is love of wickedness, not humanity. Or, if there be sometimes a sort of what is called good-nature in it, it is a false sort; and one that approaches very near to being directly vicious: as unquestionably some dispositions are, which in common speech bear this excellent name. Such, for instance, is the yielding flexibleness, that will let men deny nothing to their immoral and imprudent, or perhaps artful companions, whatever pain it gives their worthiest and most respectable friends. Such is the superficial gaiety, that first invites and deceives others into sin; then, without the least concern, abandons them to ruin. Such, lastly, is the thoughtless and profuse generosity, that often usurps the place both of proper charity and even of justice: and, by prompting men to do at some times immoderately great and kind things, without need; reduces them to do, at others, mean, and hard, and oppressive things, contrary to the strongest obligations.

These wrong sorts of good-nature (and, melancholy as the number of them is, there are still more) should never tempt us

to be unreasonably suspicious of others, though vigilant caution is an essential part of wisdom: but they ought surely to put us on a careful and frequent trial of our own hearts. Is the benevolence of temper and behaviour, for which we value ourselves, and expect the world to value us, of the right stamp? Is no instance of it ostentation, to catch applause; or cunning, to carry points that we have in view? Are we good to those, who differ from us in their way of thinking, whose reputation eclipses, whose competition obstructs us, whose interest with others is superior to ours? Are we ready to befriend unadorned disagreeable merit; to bestow private favours on such as can make us no return; and exercise bountifully, when occasion requires, those kinds of beneficence to which we are otherwise least addicted? Doth our kindness to particular persons flow from, at least is it consistent with, a sincere concern for the happiness of all mankind? Are we truly desirous and active to promote their spiritual and eternal, as well as temporal and present, welfare? And, lastly, are the demonstrations, that we have given of this excellent temper, proportionable to the degree of it which God conferred on us originally, and the means we have had of improving and exercising it since? For from those, who have enjoyed a greater share of these, a greater share of usefulness in their respective stations is as much to be expected as a more plentiful contribution of alms from the rich.

If the foregoing questions can be well answered, then our benevolence is a genuine moral virtue. But still there are qualifications of unspeakable moment wanting, to exalt it into that Christian grace, which the scriptures call Charity: that we place at the head of all our motives to it, the love and fear of God, producing a desire to imitate and obey him: that we humbly plead the pardon, obtained by his Son, and promised in his gospel, for the many imperfections, which a serious review will always discover in our best dispositions and performances: that we earnestly beg the needful aid of his Holy Spirit, to carry us, in this and every virtue, beyond the poor insufficient lengths, which fallen and unassisted nature can go. All this God hath enjoined: and those who presumptuously or carelessly neglect it, he will not, he cannot, accept; how fair an appearance soever they make, in the eyes of others, or their own.

Having thus explained the notion of true Christian charity, or love to mankind, I proceed,

II. To

II. To shew the value and advantages of it; first to the world in general, then to the charitable themselves.

The importance of a social spirit to the happiness of society, the necessity of mutual friendliness among creatures so mutually dependent, of compassion in a world so full of misery, of a mild forgiving temper amidst so much frailty, thoughtlessness, and ignorance, need not be proved; and, one should think, cannot easily be overlooked. The heaviest and bitterest part of the sufferings of life will be found, I believe, on inquiry, to flow from want of good-will, or want of care to shew it: and what felicity then would there rise from mens becoming universally reasonable, humane, and courteous; attentive to the interests and inclinations, the hopes and fears, the wants and sorrows, one of another? But, not to amuse ourselves with the vain expectation of every one acting thus, let each person only think, what beneficial effects, to those about him, would follow from his own doing it.

Good-nature, though expressed but in the slightest intercourses of life, gives pleasure, and encourages right behaviour sufficiently to make it worthy of being looked on, even in this lowest view, as a duty of great consequence. Whatever hath an immediate and continual influence on the happiness of others, be it in ever so trifling instances, must, on the whole, have a much greater influence than we are apt to imagine. Even the lesser demonstrations, therefore, of obliging condescension in superiors, of respectfulness and deference in inferiors, of desire to please, and willingness to be pleased, amongst equals, are matters highly worth regarding; ways in some or other of which we can every one of us be good to all around us: and it is the only goodness that most of them want from us.

But no one either needs or ought to confine the proofs of his benevolence to such narrow bounds: but, without seeking much for opportunities of exercising it, (an employment, however, the most rational and honourable of all others) will easily find no contemptible ones laid in his way, be his condition in the world almost what it will. Those of distinguished rank, for instance, do the most extensive and important service to their fellow-creatures, while they recommend the practice of religion, of virtue, of prudence, by their example, and enforce it by their authority. Persons engaged in a life of business, have considerable and frequent opportunities of shewing

valuable kindness to numbers, at one time or another, in their respective professions, with little or no loss or trouble to themselves. They, whom a better understanding, or longer experience hath made abler judges of any branch of conduct than others, what opportunities have they of directing the ignorant, warning the thoughtless, and setting the mistaken right, where, perhaps, an error persisted in may be fatal to them for ever? Especially if such as are intitled to give advice, would but study a little, first to make good counsel agreeable, and afterwards, if there be occasion, repentance easy, by receiving offenders back from wrong courses with tenderness, and endeavouring to shelter them from censures, on account of the faults they have once forsaken.

But above most others, they, to whom God hath intrusted riches, have obvious and daily opportunities of doing good, by extending bounty to the poor: under which name, tho' all ought to be included, whose circumstances are too strait for the station in which they are obliged to appear; yet the lowest part of the world hath undoubtedly, in general, by much the strongest title to the benefit of that denomination. For the distresses of these, when helpless through age or infirmities, or sunk under the burden of a numerous family to feed and cloath, are heavy to a degree, of which they, who see nothing around them but plenty and chearfulness, usually think little. And yet they are bound to think often and seriously, that our Maker's providence hath not permitted so great inequalities of condition in the human species, for one part of them to languish in misery, and the other to look down with contempt upon them. *God accepteth not the persons of princes, nor regardeth the rich more than the poor: for they are all the work of his hands* *. And his gracious intention was, that the virtues of beneficence on one hand, and gratitude on the other, should be exercised, and the joy, both of doing and receiving good, be felt amongst men. We are, therefore, none of us at liberty, either to withhold our due proportion out of covetousness, or to disable ourselves from giving it by expences of other kinds. It is true, indeed, even luxury, by the multitudes it employs, performs in part the work of charity; for so the wisdom of heaven hath ordered things, that
such

* Job. xxxiv. 19.

such as will do no good from right motives, shall do some by their very vices. But then the good done by luxurious expensiveness is very unequally done; and to such, for the most part, as need and deserve it least: besides that, all the while, it doth infinite harm both to private and public virtue and happiness. Useless professions are increased and enriched, while the more necessary ones are left destitute of hands, or impoverished by the exorbitant price of labour: a superfluous number, well able to work, are maintained in idleness, and too commonly in wickedness also; while true objects of compassion are left to the scanty allowance of the law. Besides, other evils, absolutely inseparable from luxury, would greatly over-balance the above-mentioned accidental good consequences arising from it, were they much more considerable than they are. It gives, in many respects, a very wrong turn to the minds of the great; and excites a most pernicious emulation of their follies and sins in those below them: tempts both to such behaviour, and entangles both in such difficulties, as have every where proved the final ruin of all virtue and all happiness public and private. But were it to do no harm at all, and ever so much good; yet who, that indulges himself in it, can seriously say he intended that good; intended any thing indeed, but the gratification of his own vanity and voluptuousness? Whereas, enjoying one part of a large income, with decent moderation, and disposing of the other in prudent liberalities, produces good every way; may better, both here and to eternity, the condition of those who partake of such bounty; and must be beneficial in the highest degree to him, who bestows it from a sense of duty: which is the second particular wherein the value of true charity was proposed to be shewn.

The wise Author of our beings hath kindly formed us all with a natural tenderness towards each other: which, as it gives us pain on the seeing or hearing of the miseries of our fellow-creatures, unless we wickedly harden ourselves against them; so it rewards us, when we relieve them, with the sweetest joy that we are capable of experiencing: a joy that neither is succeeded by uneasy reflections, like many others; nor vanishes quickly into nothing, like most others: but which the heart dwells upon with lasting delight and humble self-approbation. But were this pleasure much less, than who-

ever habituates himself to it will find it to be. the same goodness of nature, which is the parent of charitable beneficence, is also the best qualification for enjoying the satisfactions and moderating the vexations of social life: and therefore we cannot do a more prudent thing, than to strengthen it by exercise. Besides, good-will to others gives us the surest claim, that any thing can give, to good-will in return; the proofs of which we may easily come to want on many occasions. But though the world, and even those persons in it whom we have served, recompense us ever so ill, yet not the smallest kind action, that we have either done or designed shall be lost. For God sees them all; and will be proportionably gracious, not only to the virtues, but even the failings of those, who have made it their faithful care to shew the mercy which they hope to receive.

And this is that never-failing motive to universal benevolence, which the text urges: *have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.* Not that either the outward acts, or even the inward temper, of this one virtue, though it were extended to all our fellow-creatures, and much less if only to some small part of them, nor that perhaps the most deserving, shall excuse the wilful and unrepented neglect, either of due reverence to God, or moral government of ourselves in other respects. But seldom, indeed, will it happen, if at all, that the profane or debauched, let them be called the best-natured men that ever were, shall do near so much good as harm in the world, were the whole consequences of their behaviour well computed. But could this be ever so much otherwise, yet to honour and worship our Maker, in the manner which he hath appointed, is one of our essential obligations. and to observe the rules of chastity and temperance, decency, and order, is another. Now what we are bound to observe, we cannot possibly be left at liberty to break through or despise. And therefore *be not deceived: God is not mocked* *. Whoever lives in the known and indulgent transgression of any duty, or commission of any sin, whatever excellencies in other points he may seemingly or really have, shall not enter into the kingdom of God. Great promises are made to other single virtues, in other passages of scripture,

scripture, as well as to charity in this. And the meaning is not, that we may get to heaven by any one good quality that we please: for surely there will no one be found so bad as to have none: but each of them is supposed, though practised more eminently than the rest, to be accompanied by them; not separated from them, and set up against them: a supposition made with still more reason in the present case, than any other of the same kind: because the true love to our neighbour not only comprehends every good disposition towards him, but flows from love to God, and faith in our blessed Redeemer, and dutiful regard to the motions of the Holy Spirit. Indeed all these united, in the poor degree that we possess them, can by no means merit pardon for our failures in all; but only qualify us for obtaining that mercy which St. Peter, in the beginning of this epistle, ascribes to *the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ* *. And nothing less than a prevailing habit of every virtue will complete our qualification for final acceptance: but that of each particular one shall contribute towards it, in proportion to its value. And as beneficence, practised in its whole extent on right principles, is of the highest value, the text very properly teaches, and was designed only to teach, that charity, kindness to our fellow-creatures, practised from a principle of conscience, in every way that we have opportunity, shall contribute in a distinguished manner, to fit us for receiving forgiveness from our Creator, and thus shall *cover the multitude of our sins* at the last day. Since, therefore, being good to our brethren will give us a peculiar claim to the goodness of our heavenly Father: whoever is sensible of his past offences, let him take this way especially of evidencing his repentance; and whoever would intitle himself after death to the noblest of rewards, let him serve God throughout life in this most excellent of all duties.

* 1 Pet. i. 2.

S E R M O N XI.

ON DOING GOOD.

GAL. vi. 10.

*As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men :
especially unto them, who are of the household of faith.*

WE are all born with a natural principle of love to our kind: we all see and feel the exercise of it to be fit and right: and the continual need which we have, of the service and friendship of others, continually reminds us to be serviceable and friendly in our turns. Were men universally so, the world would be as happy as our endeavours can make it. And though it is not universally so, but far otherwise; yet whoever determines to practise this duty himself, let those around him do as they will, is sure to find his account in the course which he takes. For he will generally acquire a large share in the esteem, and good offices of mankind; especially of those whom he values: and he will always experience a delightful consciousness of intending well to them, and deserving well from them. But his chief advantage beyond comparison is, that if his kind actions proceed from a devout sense of God's commanding them; and humble trust in the aid of his Holy Spirit for performing them; and a lively faith in the merits of his blessed Son for the acceptance of them; he will then be intitled to the present protection and final approbation of his Maker and Judge: who hath declared, that our treatment of our brethren shall be a principal rule, by which he will go in his treatment of us. The truth of these things is universally acknowledged: the inference, that we are most highly concerned to be mutually useful, is extremely

tremely evident : and yet of how very little use are most of us, compared with what we might be ; and how much do we lose and suffer by our neglect !

The causes of so general a failure undoubtedly are various. Reciprocal provocations and resentments are both a powerful and a common one. Another, still more extensive, is, that wrong judged selfishness, which possesses men with such a blind eagerness for their own interest, that they cannot allow themselves to stay and think, in what it consists ; and thus they fail of receiving, as well as communicating, the satisfaction, which a different conduct would produce. But besides these, others, by no means ill disposed towards their fellow-creatures, contribute much less to their benefit and comfort than they might, either from not observing how frequently occasions for it present themselves, or from not distinguishing rightly the proper objects of their humane intentions. And therefore it may promote considerably the practice of this duty, if we make some reflexions, as the text leads us,

I. On the opportunities, which we have, of doing good.

II. On the choice of the persons, to whom we do it.

I. The opportunities. Now these are so many, of one sort or another, that some have understood the apostle to speak here of our whole life, as one continued opportunity. And therefore, in the sentences before the communion, his words are translated, *While we have time, let us do good unto all men.* Life is the time allotted for this purpose. It must be for some end, that we are placed together in society : and it could not be for a worthier, than to copy and perfect in ourselves the image of our Maker, by cultivating and exerting a benevolent spirit, one towards another. We were purposely made so necessitous and mutually dependent, that means for the exercise of mutual goodness might never be wanting. And indeed scarce a single part of our behaviour is of so wholly an indifferent nature, but some of those about us will be, more or less, the better or the worse for it.

Consider, what unceasing opportunities there are of acting agreeably or disagreeably, even in the slightest intercourses of human life. One shall be, as the son of *Sirach* expresses it, *like a lion in his house* * : terrible to all who approach him, especially

* Ecclus iv. 30.

pecially at times; and perhaps for no manner of reason; no good one, to be sure. Another shall be cold and dry, dark and distant: and perplex, as well as offend, such as have to do with him. A third, by the habitual or unseasonable melancholy of his looks and discourse, shall banish all comfort from the place, in which he lives or appears. How vastly preferable to this unsociable deportment is a behaviour of constant universal humanity; a care to contribute, on every common occasion, to the peace and ease and innocent good humour of those, with whom we converse!

Possibly such matters may be thought too inconsiderable to be mentioned in this place. But the scripture hath mentioned them. *Courteousness* is expressly enjoined there*. *A merry heart doth good like a medicine*†. And indeed, far from being small things, they are very great ones. Many have so tender a sensibility of mind, at least in respect of those, with whom they are nearly united by nature or choice, that the very happiness of their lives depends on their receiving gentle and affectionate and encouraging treatment. Again: the expectations of many concerning their most serious worldly interests are likely to succeed or fail, just according to the regard, that such or such a person hath for them: and therefore every minute alteration in his countenance or speech to them, makes a considerable one in their way of thinking of their own condition.

Nay, without any thing so particular, in all circumstances, unkind, or merely negligent behaviour gives men pain, and may do them further prejudice: while on the other hand, not only the more important evidences of good will support and revive the spirits, but the slighter expressions of it have no slight effects on those, to whom they are shewn. We commonly set about greater things with the temper, into which little ones put us. And therefore, if we come to them soured and disgusted, though perhaps it be owing to somewhat entirely unconnected with them, we shall be apt to judge unfavourably, to proceed in what lies before us with harshness, and be very different creatures from such, as nothing hath chanced to ruffle. It is also by repeated acts, that habits are acquired: and therefore, if we are often discomposed, though it be about trifles, the state of our minds will be gradually formed by the impression

* 1 Pet. iii. 8.

† Prov. xvii. 22.

impression, which those trifles make. Besides, great opportunities of exercising humanity fall, comparatively seldom, in our way: but these lower demonstrations of friendliness we can all give continually: so that were each of them singly of much less value than it is, yet frequent repetitions of them, like a multitude of small sums, would swell the account beyond imagination. And a further consideration still is, that many other instances of kindness only provide men with materials for the enjoyment of life; which they may have in plenty, and enjoy it scarce at all the better: whereas amicable and obliging demeanor adds directly to the enjoyment itself.

But I proceed now to our several opportunities of what is more usually called *doing Good*: though indeed there would be little need of specifying them, if men would but attend to what passes in the world, with the view, which they ought. Where distresses and sufferings are so common, the occasions of preventing, or removing, or alleviating them, can seldom, if ever, be far from us. But our attention, for the most part is paid, not to those who want it, but from whom we can promise ourselves the most profitable returns for it. As to the afflicted and helpless, if we do not, what is too often done, take the advantage of insulting or oppressing them, at least we are extremely prone to avoid and slight them; though, before their misfortunes, they had perhaps received many professions of respect and service from us, and possibly merited them by service done us. Yet we can make their difficulties the entertainment of our idlest conversation with perfect unconcern: be wondrous wise and happy in pointing out and aggravating their ill conduct: and if we do but drop an unmeaning declaration of being sorry for them; or gratify our spleen by censuring those, who are more immediately bound to assist them, and yet omit it; then we think we have discharged our duty abundantly. Nay, even when the care of them belongs to us in particular, we can make false pleas of inability; or invent, or however improve, little subjects of resentment against them, when all resentment, how well grounded soever, should be utterly forgotten, and lost in compassion.

While men are of such a disposition, no wonder if they see but few opportunities of doing good. Nothing can make them visible, if we blind ourselves purposely. But let there be *first a willing mind**, and cases enough, God knows, too

many, will present themselves, and call aloud for assistance. The need of study will be, not how to find out wants, but how to supply them. And yet, were we, besides taking notice of what forces itself upon us, to set apart now and then, a little time for considering wherein we could be helpful to any about us; or to enquire, if no occasion offered amongst them, where else we could meet with fit objects of benevolence, it would surely be nothing more, than the condition of human nature, the sympathy of man with man, and of Christian with Christian, recommends to us all.

It is very true, most persons ought to fix their thoughts chiefly on their own business: and if they neglect that for the sake of serving others, may do great injustice to those, for whom they should be principally concerned, and soon come to want the help, which they go out of their way to give. But still there are many disengaged enough from private cares, to make the good of their neighbours their principal concern. And God, who hath given them leisure for it, will expect it from them. Nay, indeed sometimes the more affairs men have upon their hands, the more ability they have on that very account of being useful in various methods, to their fellow-creatures. And whoever will keep the desire of doing good present always to his mind, will easily discern many more opportunities for it, than any one else can possibly point out to him.

It may however be expedient to mention some distinctly. But the particular advantages for this purpose, which persons of high rank, magistrates, parents, masters, teachers, or any others, have by virtue of their respective stations, though deserving their utmost regard, are too many for me to enumerate now: and therefore I shall only set before you some of the means, by which, independently of such relations, we may be serviceable to each other.

They, whom greater abilities, or closer attention, or more experience, have made better judges, either of the conduct of life in general, or of such and such affairs in it, must frequently have noble opportunities of directing the ignorant, and setting the mistaken right; of preventing the distresses of this world, and even the punishments of the next. Advice indeed, is too commonly given so as to produce little, if any, desirable effect: at improper times, in a haughty and provoking manner, perhaps with a visible intention of only shewing our authority, or
superior

superior wisdom. And therefore it exasperates and hardens, instead of convincing and reclaiming. Nay, it may be feared, there are those, who had rather their counsel should not be followed; that they may triumph in publishing afterwards the ill consequences of disregarding it. But they, who really desire to do good in this way, and will apply themselves with any degree of that care to prevail with others, which we use in bringing them over to serve our own private interests, (and in truth doing good is our most important interest) may certainly discover many fit seasons and methods of recommending prudence, virtue, religion, to those with whom they converse.

Our opinion sometimes is directly and sincerely asked, in a point of consequence. Then it is barbarous to refuse it: and almost, if not quite, as bad, to give it with an artful reserve, concealing or disguising something material. But if men do not ask us; it may be they know not, whom to ask, or how it would be taken, or have not the courage, or possibly are proceeding wrong without suspicion. How excellent a charity now must it be, in any such case, to do another a most essential piece of service of ones own accord! Not every by-stander indeed, who finds himself inclined to dictate, is authorized to intermeddle. But real well-wishers, who know the circumstances of an affair, and may have weight, should not be too backward; and for fear of losing their labour, or possibly displeasing, suffer another, perhaps a friend, to fall into great inconveniences, which speaking a few words might have prevented, and secured his esteem and gratitude ever after.— Nay, if prudent advice is not followed so soon, or so well as might be wished, we ought not immediately to give up any one, either in anger or despair. Good sense will easily perceive, when there is no room left for hope: and till then, good nature will try on.

But indeed, when we have no opportunity of giving counsel to any particular person, who hath taken a wrong course, or is in danger of it; being careful to set the example of pious and virtuous and discreet behaviour, is giving the best counsel silently to all around us. And, if we do but join with it fit evidences, on fit occasions, of our approving, in others, innocence and beneficence, and disliking folly, wickedness, and impiety, *our light will so shine before men*, that we may justly hope some at least will be led by it to *glorify our Father*,

*which is in heaven**, and become happy here and hereafter.

A second very valuable and very amiable species of kindness is, expressing concern for the characters of those who are unjustly attacked. Every one must be sensible, how sadly detraction and calumny prevail in the world; how many things utterly false are related, and how currently believed; what aggravating circumstances are added, and invidious turns given to things in which there may be some truth, quite sufficient to alter the nature of them; and how much, not only of vexation, but mischief, is caused, both by the malicious and the wanton liberties, taken in this respect. Here then opens to us a large field of performing most useful and acceptable services one to another; which must, in the end, redound also to our own quiet and security; by shewing a general distaste of slander; and, where we can, the particular reasons for disbelieving it. For we ought no more to let the reputation, than the person, of any one be wounded, if we can prevent such cruelty. But, above all, we should contradict falsehoods, when we are known to be acquainted with the truth: else we shall be understood to confirm them. Indeed, opposition made to injurious reports, by some persons at some times, especially of epidemical unreasonableness, may be to little purpose. But then it is the peculiar duty of such as have credit and influence, to stop the progress of such wickedness: not to let it go on, and secretly rejoice in it because it serves their turn; but honestly do justice to their keenest adversaries; and consider enmity, as a peculiar advantage for doing it effectually: because our testimony in their favour will be sure to obtain belief. And making this use of our situation will not only be truly christian, and singularly generous; but the likeliest method, either of putting an end to the difference, which should always be our first view, or of continuing it, if it must continue, with great honour to ourselves.

A third way of being useful is, paying due regard to the worthy and able, wherever we find them: shewing countenance to such, instead of those who deserve or want it not: assisting them, when they set out with less favourable circumstances of friends or fortune, or cannot submit to the usual arts of advancing themselves, and are pushed back by the forward boldness of other competitors. Or, if we are not able to serve them ourselves, at least we may contribute to make their merit known: particularly to such as can help them, and perhaps may be glad of

of their help: so that we may do a great kindness to both at once. And if such occasions do not offer, it may frequently be worth while to bestow some pains in search of them: not contenting ourselves with wishes in their behalf, when a moderate degree of diligence would procure them what we wish; nor counting the happiness of a deserving person so small a matter, and our own trouble, so very great a one, as to make a difficulty of taking a few steps, that we should not have chosen else, when it may promote so desirable an end.

These, and others that might be mentioned, are unexpensive ways of doing good; which generally will enlarge, not restrain, our capacity of doing more. But the most usual notion of this duty is communicating of our plenty to supply the necessities of our poor brethren. And wealth may often be expended to the great benefit of others, yet at the same time, with no mighty loss, if not a prospect of gain, to ourselves. For as the best method of relieving the able poor is employing them; so there are many, who, if they would contrive for it, might employ them to their own profit; as others might in such works, as would be conveniences, ornaments, and rational amusements. And so far as helping them to live comfortably is the real motive to these things, they are all real charities.

But supposing that we have no other way of doing good by laying out money, than what in strictness of speech is called alms; bestowing without expectation of any return from the receivers: there are very few, but can give in this manner, now and then, enough to be a most welcome relief to one or another of the wretched objects every where to be found. And many more than do, can afford frequent and large liberalities of various kinds. Now these greatly mistake, if they imagine, that the duty of beneficence out of their worldly substance is sufficiently discharged by some small and almost insignificant distributions to the lowest part of the poor. As the providence of God hath placed different persons in different stations, whatever is truly requisite (for I speak not of such imaginary wants as vanity and fancy frame, but whatever is really needful) to support men decently in the rank which propriety obliges them to maintain, is nearly as necessary to them as meaner accommodations are to others. And if they have much less, their difficulties and straits may be extremely pitiable; which is one thing that merits the careful attention of the rich; especially with regard to their relations, friends and dependants.

But

But indeed we should all attend to every thing, from whence a claim upon us, either of mercy or of bounty can arise.

Many perhaps have not sufficient knowledge of particular persons in distress to bestow amongst them so much as they ought to bestow in charity. But it is easy for them to find those who have. And if they are unwilling, though it must be without reason, to trouble, or even to trust such; there are public charities of various kinds, in any of which, both the smallest and the largest sums may be undoubtedly well employed.

It is true, extending our bounty so wide may cramp our other expences: and possibly so much the better. It may prevent or lessen the increase of our fortunes: but that may well happen, without the least harm done us. What we have no occasion for, and probably never shall, can be of no value to us. And therefore, as it is impossible that men should for ever have occasion to lay up still more for their families, there must be multitudes, to whom parting with what will make many of their fellow-creatures lastingly happy, is in effect parting with nothing. But where it is something, and even much, surely the consideration for which we part with it, the good of one or more of our brethren, is a very just and weighty one: besides that our own good is most deeply concerned in it, as I hope you have seen. Indeed, had we no other inducements to acts of charity, it would be adviseable to do frequently such as are adapted to our abilities, were it only to prevent the love of money from fixing and growing upon us, and to mortify that wretched craving for more, by withdrawing from it part of its food.

But all motives of worldly prudence in favour of any kind of beneficence, are infinitely weaker than those by which religion invites us to every kind: the love, the example, the command of our Maker and Redeemer; enforced by the assurance, that we are then employing most wisely our thoughts, our time, and our property, when they are spent in the most judicious endeavours that we can use, to serve and benefit any part of mankind; and are then most effectually securing our own interest for ever, when we shew the most affectionate and extensive concern for the interests of those around us, in proportion to the importance of each. *As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men. And let us not be weary in well-doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not*.*

* Gal. vi. 9.

S E R M O N X I I .

ON DOING GOOD.

GAL. vi. 10.

*As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men :
especially unto them, who are of the household of faith.*

I N discoursing on these words, I have already shewn, what various opportunities we have of promoting the happiness, and preventing, removing, or alleviating the afflictions of our fellow-creatures : by the good nature and courtesy of our common behaviour to them ; by information and counsel occasionally given them ; by a due concern for their characters and reputations ; by our countenance, favour, and interest ; and, if their condition require it, by assisting them with our substance also.

I proceed therefore at present, as I originally proposed, to shew you

II. Who are the proper objects of our kindness.

Now concerning this, the only general rule undoubtedly is that of the text : *Let us do good unto all men.* He who hath created us in his own image *, is loving unto every man ; and his mercy is over all his works †. He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust ‡. We ought therefore to approve ourselves the children of the Highest, by being merciful, as our Father also is merciful § : and, whatever station the wisdom of his providence hath allotted us, fill up the sphere of our influence, be it greater or less, with acts of kindness. The affection of benevolence was
planted

* Gen. i. 27.

† Matth. v. 45.

‡ Psal. cxlv. 9.

§ Luke vi. 35, 36.

planted in us, and the exercise of it enjoined us, not for the advantage of some few particulars, but of all human kind: and whoever is capable of being the better for us, ought to be the better, if we can make him so, without neglecting others, who have stronger claims upon us.

In many cases which I have mentioned to you, doing the most important service to one person will not at all diminish our ability of doing as great to others. Communicating of our property indeed will: and here we are not to understand our Saviour's precept, *Give to every man that asketh of thee* *, in the utmost extent of the words, any more than several other of his precepts. *Giving to every one* thus, unless it were so little as to be of no use, would soon disable us from giving to any one; indeed from supporting ourselves. And therefore his meaning must be only that no person should be excluded; either out of selfishness, which is a common fault, or out of malignity, as the *Samaritan* woman at first would have excluded him for being a *Jew* †, and as many of the *Jews* excluded the Heathens for being idolaters: but that we should extend our beneficence to all of all sorts, on proper occasions, as far as can be reasonably expected.

Suppose therefore an entire stranger to apply for our charity: if the law provides a method, as in this nation it doth, by which the truth of his complaint may be examined, and relief granted him, in case it proves to be true; directing and referring him to that, will, ordinarily speaking, be sufficient; and doing more will encourage idle vagrants and cheats. But if the legal provision doth not reach to his case; or if the officers intrusted with it are so hard-hearted as to reject him; (which is too frequent;) and we have means to find out, and leisure to inquire, whether he wants help; and have cause to think he doth, and are able to give it him; it is relation enough to us, that he is of the same nature with us; and recommendation enough, however unacquainted with him we were before, that his necessities have brought him to our acquaintance now.

Suppose farther, that such a one is of a different party, a different country, a different religion from our own; these things ought to be no bar in the least to any needful good offices

* Luke vi. 30.

† John iv. 9.

fices from us : and we shall do the more honour to the party, the country, the religion, of which we are, the more tender compassion we shew him.

Farther still : let persons have done us injuries ; let those injuries be as great as we think them, though they seldom or never are in reality : yet they remain human creatures, which alone requires of us humanity towards them : and we have perhaps also injured them ; at least in other instances we have offended both God and man ; and ought to forgive, as we hope to be forgiven.

If indeed any unnecessary kindness will certainly, or in all likelihood, produce harm upon the whole ; whatever appearance of good nature, friendship, generosity, it may wear ; we must remember it is a false appearance, and abstain from it as immoral. But otherwise the rule is, to do service gladly to every one of our fellow-creatures.

Not that we are bound to do them equal service. Their titles to it may be very unequal : and where there is a difference, we ought to make one. Nor, be that of any one ever so strong, should we so exhaust ourselves upon any single object, as to leave nothing for others, which in the common course of things must fall in our way, and may deserve at least as much notice. But then, on the other hand, we must not reject those, who need assistance now, under pretence of reserving ourselves for worthier petitioners hereafter ; be always waiting for a fitter occasion than the present, and perhaps never find it : an artifice, which, it may be feared, some have employed. Indeed, evasions are easily invented, in this whole matter of doing good, by those who seek for them. And all, that the teachers of religion have in their power towards preventing it, is, first to remind men, that every one's true interest consists, not in fencing against his duty, and getting rid of it, but in learning and performing it ; then to state the grounds, which different sorts of claimants have to look for kindnesses from them : and so leave it, both to the benevolent and the selfish, to shew what they are, and take the consequences.

The first and usually strongest claim, is proximity of kindred. They who are nearly related to us, belong immediately to our care. Others have a ~~case~~ of the same kind, incumbent on them. And the good of the whole is best secured by the due attention of every one to his own part. Accordingly

God hath interwoven in our nature powerful instincts, which admonish us continually of this obligation : and yet hath admonished us of it again by express words of scripture. *If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel* *. But then it must be observed, that *providing* plainly appears from the context, and from the use of the word in other places, to mean in this, not, laying up for them without end still more and more, which is often no duty at all ; but, maintaining them properly out of what we have, which is always an important duty. And even, where both these things are needful, both may be done ; and much room left, in large fortunes especially, for acts of beneficence to others. But here now is one instance, how easy it is to make plausible excuses for neglecting plain precepts. What plea can look fairer, than making provision for those who are united to us by blood or affinity ? And who can fix the bounds of that provision for another person's family ? Yet bounds there are, beyond which we cannot really increase their happiness ; nay, beyond which we ought not to consult their interests. The duty of taking care to put them in good circumstances is but one of many, concerning the disposal of our income : and if it be carried farther, than is fairly consistent with the rest, great wickedness may be committed under colour of it, and often hath been.

Another ground of preference in doing good is friendship : which indeed we are not bound to contract with any one : but when it is contracted, (and we find our Saviour himself had his beloved disciple) the ties of it are by no means to be disregarded. Friendship, when strict, comprehends a tacit agreement and covenant between those who enter into it to look upon the concerns of each other in a great measure as their own. Mere intimacy of acquaintance is a lower sort of friendship. Cultivating both sorts by mutual kind offices contributes very much to the enjoyment of life : and may contribute to the improvement of each party in knowledge and goodness, as well as to the advancement of their worldly prosperity. Others, it must be supposed, have their own friends zealous for them ; and we are to have a proper zeal for ours. Not but that one, who was unknown to us before, may often,

if

* 1 Tim. v. 8.

if his merit or want be considerably greater, justly expect, that we should give him the preference. And it is no less blameable, than common, to promote the interests of those, with whom we are connected, beyond reasonable bounds: raising them to stations, perhaps of consequence, for which they are not qualified; and depressing, for that end, others, who have pretensions far better founded. Such friendships are plain confederacies against equity and public good. And if this be true, even in the case of real and well-chosen friends, much more strongly doth it hold in that of mere favourites, whom we have adopted from arbitrary fancy, or liking to their obsequious behaviour. For indeed worthy characters will seldom condescend to the meanesses requisite for gaining and preserving immoderate degrees of fondness. But were that otherwise, private partialities ought never to take place of reason and justice. When they do, it is false good nature, and gross iniquity.

A third title to peculiar regard, is that which persons acquire by having done us favours. We are in strictness the debtors of those to whom we have obligations: and should always be contriving to make as prompt payment, with as large interest, as possible. It is perhaps one of the heaviest discouragements to useful and kind actions and undertakings, that a suitable return for them is so seldom made. The hopes of gratitude prompt even the selfish to many obliging deeds, of which they would not otherwise have thought. And the exercise of gratitude propagates and multiplies new kindnesses continually. We should therefore treasure it in our memories, that if the inequality of other circumstances be not very considerable, we are always to do good, where we have received it. Yet still, when there would be any shocking impropriety in this, we must excuse ourselves for the present, and make the speediest and fullest amends, that we can, some other way.

But besides those, who have a right to the especial notice of some, there are others peculiarly intitled to the compassion of all.

And the first rank of these consists of such, as the scripture calls, in a spiritual sense, *wretched and miserable, and poor and blind and naked**: who are wholly or nearly destitute of Christian faith and hope, and ignorant of the indispensable

R 2

rules

* Rev. iii. 17.

rules of life. Multitudes there are of such, even in this enlightened nation: and multitudes more, who can scarce help knowing their duty, live in almost a total disregard to it. Now their case is the sadder, as it gives little concern to the generality of other persons, and perhaps none at all to themselves. Yet *their feet go down to death, their steps take hold on hell* *. Therefore, as parents are chiefly bound to see, that there be none such amongst their children; masters and mistresses, to look after them in their families, and ministers in their parishes; so all people are bound in proportion to think, what they can do likewise towards *causing the glorious light of the gospel to shine into the hearts of men* †.

Of temporal claims to the kindness of all without distinction, the principal constant one is undoubtedly that of poverty: especially when sickness or losses happen, or work is scarce, or seasons rigorous, or provisions dear, and many mouths to be filled. They indeed who prefer an idle and vagabond life of beggary before honest labour, ought not to be encouraged in it by relief, but abandoned to the wretchedness, which they chuse. The law of God passes sentence on them, *If any one will not work, neither let him eat* ‡: and the law of the land corrects them justly for the needless weight, which they hang upon society. Nay, such as cannot now labour, if they have brought themselves into straits by debauchery, negligence or extravagance, though they must have some, yet it should be a sparing maintenance, unless deep repentance plead in their favour. But the distresses of those, who are brought low without their own fault, and have striven to support themselves as long as they could, should be alleviated with the tenderest pity. Especially, if they be friendless, as well as helpless, this makes the height of a compassionate case. A man in this situation may nominally have many and able friends; yet if they will take no competent care of him, he is to be considered as really having none: and their neglecting him is far from being a reason, why others should do likewise.

We may indeed alledge, to excuse our parsimony towards the poor, that we are afraid of impostures, and of throwing away our charity. But then why will we not, where there is any likelihood of truth, make inquiry? Believing every one,

to

* Prov. v. 5.

† 2 Cor. iv. 4, 6.

‡ 2 Thess. iii. 10.

to be sure, is feeding the unworthy with what the deserving ought to have. But resolving to disbelieve every one is a mean contrivance to spare our money, which both God and man will see through. Very possibly, after our best care, we may sometimes be deceived. But the more danger there is that many of our endeavours to do good may fail, the more care we ought to use, that some part however may succeed: imitating the wisdom of the husbandman, who commits to the earth perhaps more than double of the corn that he expects to bear fruit; and observing, that under a similar image, the scripture hath expressly given this very injunction. *In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not, whether shall prosper either this or that; or whether they both shall be alike good**. But one thing we certainly know, that all attempts, directed by our best judgment to the benefit of others, will at least benefit ourselves. For they will improve in us by exercise a merciful disposition; and recommend us to his approbation, who graciously accepts the will for the deed.

Every way of doing good hath some advantage, peculiar to itself: but relieving the distressed poor hath many considerable ones. Uneasiness is much more stronger felt, than satisfaction: and therefore taking away pain is making a greater change for the better, than adding pleasure. Besides, there is oftener room for it: and it is commonly sooner done, and at less expence. Bestowing what would scarce make one in moderately good circumstances happier at all, would give comfort and joy to great numbers of the indigent. And further still, the sufferings of the poor are true and real: the wants of others are frequently imaginary, and on several accounts unfit to be supplied.

But though poverty, I mean when joined with sobriety and industry, hath the strongest title to our regard; yet the two latter alone, though accompanied with no distress, greatly merit countenance and favour. Frugality and diligence in a lawful calling are hopeful marks of an honest mind. And it would be very hard, that they, who do their best, should for want of encouragement, fail to thrive and rise: especially considering, that, while they labour for themselves, they labour for the public too.

These

* Eccl. xi. 6.

These good qualities are yet more deserving of notice when they are adorned by knowledge and skill. For not only every thing valuable ought to have its value properly acknowledged; but preferring persons of less abilities to others of greater, may occasion many to suffer by their ignorance: and it disheartens men from attempts of excelling, to which they should always be excited.

But the highest sort of merit, beyond comparison, is that which the apostle singles out in the text, to recommend by the expression of *the household of faith*. All good Christians, being through the grace of God conformed to his likeness, and adopted by him to be heirs of salvation, are therefore, when taken separately, called the children of their heavenly Father; when jointly, his family or household. And there being no admittance into this family, or continuance in it, but by such a belief of religion, as produces an uniform practice of it, therefore it is called *the household of faith*.

And one reason for directing the primitive Christians to do good, especially to their brethren in the faith, probably was, because the generality of them were of the poorer sort, and yet were least likely to meet with assistance from others: their heathen neighbours being offended by the singularity of their notions, and condemned by the strictness of their lives: on which account it was very needful, that the rich members of their own communion should consider them in the first place.

But another main reason doubtless was, that Christians were, what the design of christianity is to make them, more religious and virtuous than other men, and therefore bound to treat one another as being so. They were to prefer a fellow-believer in their benefactions, not only for belonging to the same body, but because *the righteous is more excellent than his neighbour* *. And this points out a way for us also, though *the household of faith*, in outward profession and appearance, is of equal extent with our country, to observe however the spirit and intent of the apostle's precept, by making it one great rule of all our charities, to be most liberal to the truest Christians; that is, the most pious and virtuous and honest persons. In this sense his direction is so extremely reasonable and important, that the heathen Emperor *Julian*, writing, 300 years after, to the heathen high priest of these very *Galatians*, to whom this epistle

is

* Prov. xii. 26.

is written, could not forbear inserting it in words so nearly the same, that there can be no doubt from whom the thought was borrowed. *Let us therefore, faith he, communicate of our substance to all men, but more freely to those of good minds* *. And certainly nothing can be more judicious †. Every kind of distinction ought to have a proportionable regard shewn it: and therefore the highest and most honourable ought to have the greatest. The private prudence of acting thus, though a selfish reason, deserves mention: that whoever assists a worthy person, may be sure to have the favour gratefully received; and as far as possible, repaid; whereas on others there is no dependance. *When thou wilt do good, faith the son of Sirack, know to whom thou doest it: So shalt thou be thanked for thy benefits. Do good to the godly man, and thou shalt find a recompence: and if not from him, yet from the Most High* ‡. For God, who, to speak in the language of St. Paul, is the saviour, the preserver and benefactor, of all men, but especially of those that believe §, expects us to imitate him, not only in the universality of his beneficence, but in the peculiar notice, which he takes of the fittest objects of it. And accordingly we find, that this was the deliberate solemn resolution of the psalmist. *O my soul, thou hast said unto the Lord, thou art my God. My goodness extendeth not to thee: but to the saints that are in the earth; even to those, who excel in virtue; in whom is all my delight* ¶.

It is one of the oldest complaints in the world, that no sufficient difference is made between the good and bad in the distribution of happiness. And though it belongs only to the great judge of all to remedy this evil completely, as he will at the last day, yet we should every one contribute our utmost to lessen

* Κοινωνητέον οὖν τῶν χρημάτων ἀπασιν ἀνθρώποις· ἀλλὰ τοῖς μὲν ἐπιεικῶς ἐλευθεριώτερον· τοῖς δὲ ἀποροῖς ἔτι πλεονάζον, ὅσον ἐπαρκεῖται τῇ χρείᾳ. p. 290. Ed. Spanh. Though ἐπιεικῶς may seem opposed to ἀποροῖς, and therefore to signify what sometimes *honesti* doth in *Latin*, and the *better sort* in *English*; yet I find not, that it hath that sense. And *Julian*, a little before, faith we must not neglect τῆς πνεύμας, ἀλλὰς τε ὅταν ἔπιεικῶς τινες τυχωσι τὸν τροπὸν. And *Arist* Rhet. l. 1. c. 2. §. 3. uses ἐπιεικῶς for a good man, and ἐπιεικὴς for a worthy character.

† Donabit (sapiens) aut bonis, aut eis quos facere poterit bonos. Donabit cum summo consilio, dignissimos eligens. Sen. de vita beat. c. 23. where, and c. 24. see more.

‡ Ecclus xii. 1, 2.

§ 1 Tim. iv. 10.

¶ Psal. xvi. 2, 3.

lessen it in the mean time. Not only the interest of religion requires it of us, but that of mankind; who will always be miserable in proportion as they are wicked: and it is encouraging wickedness, not to encourage virtue. This neglect, in those who have power and influence, produces unspeakable mischief: and in all ranks downwards, it must be of far greater consequence, than is generally apprehended, to lay hold on every opportunity of shewing, that we respect and will befriend worthy characters, and think no obligation superior to that of supporting piety and morals in this manner.

Thus I have gone through the chief claims, that can be made to our regard in doing good. The more of them unite in one person, the stronger his plea becomes: and if, at any time, being divided between several, they make the rule of our conduct seem dubious; let us only take care to preserve an impartial desire of acting rightly, and we shall make few, if any, mistakes of great importance. *The integrity of the upright shall guide them: and the righteousness of the perfect shall direct his way* *. Most of our difficulties about the best sorts, and fittest objects, and requisite proportions of beneficence, arise, it may be feared, not so often from real ignorance or doubt, as from unwillingness. Let us all therefore endeavour first to conquer that, by reflecting seriously on the many and strong motives, that urge us *to do good and to communicate* †: let us form our minds, with the most assiduous care, to a temper of universal benevolence and love, not to be exercised now and then only, on extraordinary and distant occasions, but to animate the whole of our behaviour to each other. To the exactest vigilance over ourselves, let us join our most ardent prayers to God, that his Holy Spirit, for the sake of his blessed Son, may quicken, restrain, direct us; and then let us chearfully go on our way: where the case is plain, follow the dictates of an honest heart without hesitation; where it seems perplexed, judge as well as we can, without scruple or terror. For we serve a most gracious master; and so long as we serve him with a sincerely right intention, we shall probably seldom err from our duty, and certainly never fail of our reward.

* Prov. xi. 3, 5.

† Heb. xiii. 16.

S E R M O N XIII.

THE DUTIES OF THE YOUNG.

TIT. ii. 6.

Young men likewise exhort to be sober-minded.

INSTRUCTING men to *remember their Creator in the days of their youth**, is laying in their hearts the only foundation of every thing good and happy: but the work is far from being compleated, when the foundation is laid. Not only the general duties of life are to be built upon it; but the particular duties of every one's condition in life: for these of all others, we are most concerned, and yet often least willing, to know and attend to. They should therefore be drawn out, and laid before us as minutely as they well can: and each be called upon to study those more especially, which he is more especially obliged to practise. Now as the several tempers, ranks, and employments of men, and the several relations they stand in to each other, so their several ages also, lay them under peculiar obligations: for which reason St. *Peter* and St. *John* in their epistles address themselves to younger persons, and to elder separately; and St. *Paul* in this epistle directs *Titus* to do the same thing. But though both have much need of admonition, yet the young plainly need it most; as they are just entering into the world, with little knowledge, less experience, and yet scarcely ever any distrust; with lively spirits and warm passions to mislead them, and time to go a great way wrong, if they do not go right. In the spring-season of life, especially as it advances towards summer, whatever the soil produces, (and the human heart is fruitful of evil) shoots out so fast, that a few days neglect of weeding and pruning, occasions a visible alteration for the worse. And therefore the utmost

VOL. I.

S

CARE

* Eccl. xii. 1.

care should be taken then, to keep all in good order, by the continual exercise of that *sobriety of mind*, that considerate self-government, which the apostle prescribes indeed to every one, but which they who principally want it, ought to understand as principally prescribed to them. It is true, in this verse he mentions only *young men*: but in the preceding he had given the same rule for young women: and accordingly I shall speak to both, without distinction, in two discourses on this subject.

I. The first and chief thing, in which young people are concerned to shew sobriety of mind, is moderating their natural fondness for pleasure; and the two sorts of pleasure, from which they are in danger, are sensual gratifications, and gay amusements.

As to the former, St. Paul hath directed that *fornication and all uncleanness be not once named amongst * Christians*. And the less they are named, even to caution against them, the better: provided it be well understood and considered, that they not only fill the lives of those who are guilty of them, and of others, with a variety of temporal sufferings, too commonly experienced; but fatally indispose them to the love of God and virtue, and disqualify them for the spiritual happiness of the world to come. Therefore, *dearly beloved, I beseech you, as strangers and pilgrims, whose chief interest lies not here, but in another state, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul †*. All ranks, both sexes, how strangely soever multitudes of one seem to forget it, are equally bound by this restraint: bound to avoid every thing likely to misguide their conduct, or to inflame their desires; and to employ their thoughts so constantly on what is good or lawful, as to exclude from them what is bad. For by such care, early taken, the preservation of their innocence will be easy: which, for want of it, is falsely imagined impossible. Thus then, to speak in the words of our apostle, *Let every one know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour, not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles, which know not God ‡*. And to that end, *Let every one, as Solomon advises, keep his heart with all diligence: for out of it are the issues of life §*.

Together with the sins of this kind, those of intemperance
in

* Eph. v. 3.

† 1 Pet. ii. 11.

‡ 1 Thess. iv. 4, 5.

§ Prov. iv. 23.

in drinking, or even eating, which are closely connected with them, ought to be carefully shunned, as peculiarly opposite to the character of *sober-minded*, by young people; who of all others have the least need of such indulgences, and are the most hurt by them; subjected to painful and dangerous diseases; exposed to early distress in their circumstances; and besides, for the most part, either sunk into stupidity and insignificance, or raised into wildness and madness, frequently followed by proportionable dejection and melancholy. Therefore, instead of such excess, they must, as *St. Paul* farther directs, *keep under the body and bring it into subjection* *; not by hurtful or fanciful austerities, but by rational self-denial: remembering, that even in common exercises and contests of strength and activity, *every man, that striveth for the mastery, is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible* †. This and every passage of scripture, which admonishes to *flee youthful lusts* ‡, they must frequently read and recollect and pray over, as the most powerful means to secure, and if they fall, to recover themselves. For *wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? even by ruling himself after thy word* §.

The other sort of pleasures, especially dangerous to young people, are gay amusements. Undoubtedly cheerfulness is as innocent, as it is amiable: it may and should be expressed by those that have it, and allowed and encouraged by those who have it not: for it both gives delight, and doth good. The disposition to it was unquestionably planted in us by our Maker, with intent that it should be gratified: and youth is plainly the natural season for it. But still, all this by no means exempts it from discipline and government. Suppose a constitution or a temper by nature warm and choleric should be industriously or negligently farther heated, instead of being watched and moderated, what would be the consequence? Suppose that gravity and wariness, which is as natural to old age as gaiety to youth, should for that reason be carried on to its utmost extent; plainly that would be wrong; surely then the contrary extreme is equally wrong. And indeed if we consider the make and circumstances of man, we shall soon discover many motives for keeping a strict hand upon our inclinations to all the several things which I have just mentioned.

S 2

Love

* 1 Cor. ix. 27. † v. 25. ‡ 2 Tim. ii. 22. § Ps. cxix. 9.

Love of pleasure is undeniably one part of our nature : but sense of duty, and concern for lasting happiness, are as evident and much more important parts : yet we must often trample upon these, if we always follow that. Immoderate desires of present gratification, if we suffer them to be constantly soliciting us, will frequently prevail when they ought not ; and hurry us on suddenly, or intice us gradually, to such lengths as we never intended ; possibly till our heart is totally corrupted, and the care of our conduct intirely thrown aside. Witness the many examples of dispositions, that once promised better things, betrayed by indulgences merely indiscreet at first, into gross vices, and sometimes open dissoluteness. Now what ruins or impairs our virtue, is in proportion prejudicial to our happiness ; even that present happiness, which the votaries of pleasure are pursuing. Not only reason proves this, if they would condescend to be reasoned with, but daily experience. How many have we all of us seen or heard of, who setting out with nothing worse than a thoughtless passion for diversion and entertainment, have grievously, nay perhaps irrecoverably, injured, in a few years, some their healths or fortunes, others their characters and peace of mind ; and treasured up for the remainder of their days, pain and want, remorse and shame, it may be artfully palliated, but severely felt ! Think then a while, you that are young, and have pity on yourselves. Shall all this firm and vigorous strength, this affluence of circumstances, this ease of heart and openness of face, this delightful prospect of being esteemed and happy through the whole of life ; shall it, merely for want of a little self-restraint, be cast away in the very entrance upon life, and exchanged for guilt and misery, to abide with you during the rest of it ? For these are the natural fruits of such neglect : and it is the weakest vanity, to hope that you shall escape better than others, unless you keep safe upon firm ground.

Or suppose you come off ever so much better than you had cause to expect : still making pleasure your main business must hinder you, first from preparing for, then from attending to, the proper employments of your station : by which alone you must be great sufferers, and probably others besides you. But farther ; indulging, and, by indulgence, adding force to desires of this kind, spoils and vitiates the inward frame, just as feeding too freely on meats of high relish doth the bodily appetite.

Common

Common food quickly becomes insipid: and in a little time we are surfeited of what pleased us most. Then follow sickly longings for we scarce know what: and the conclusion is abhorring and nauseating every thing. So it is with the mind. They who must always have somewhat extremely delicious to fill up their hours, reject as flat and tasteless a number of things, with which others are very well entertained. What they themselves were entertained with once, after a while grows cloying: and as the world is not formed to afford exquisite novelties frequently, they have miserable intervals of eager wishing for delight, which if they seem now and then to obtain, their satisfaction in them very soon deadens away to nothing. And thus they waste their days in the affectation of wonderful felicity, but in the real suffering of most wearisome satiety and listlessness. Human nature is not fitted to support a perpetual flutter of jollity and mirth: Which, like spirituous liquors, may appear at the instant to raise and enliven those who use them; but, generally speaking, will soon wear them out, and sink them down into a deplorable state of languor and lowness; from which at length the most pernicious augmentation of the dose will scarce afford them a moment's relief.

Therefore be persuaded to look forward a little, and attend to consequences. Let the love of pleasure importune you ever so strongly; still, how delightful soever the draught is, to swallow it can never be all, that a thirsty person hath to consider. It must be a much more material question, whether no mischief will ensue. Mistake not the beginning of life for the whole. Providence in great wisdom hath furnished every period of it with proper satisfactions of its own, and proper employments for the service of the next. Youth is to prepare us for the comfortable enjoyment of manhood: manhood for that of old age: each part of our existence on earth for the blessedness of heaven. Second the intention, pursue the direction of your gracious Maker; and be assured you will never find your account in contradicting it. You relish only such and such things at present; but provide for the feelings you will have hereafter; and, like those who are to travel through different climates, lay in for them all, what the knowing and prudent advise. Suppose in your childhood you had done whatever was then agreeable to you, and nothing else: how sad a figure must your youth have made! Why, just as contemptible

ble and wretched will your riper age be, if you follow that rule now.

Or could you escape all inconveniences here from such behaviour; yet, as you cannot think this even a moral, much less a religious manner of life, you may be sure it must end ill hereafter. You were created, not merely to please yourselves, but to serve your fellow-creatures, and honour your Maker. You have faculties given you for these purposes: you are to account for the use of them. They are become by the fall of our first parents weak and insufficient: you have used them ill; and made our condition yet worse. A method of pardon and recovery is offered to you; but offered on terms of deep repentance, humble faith in a Redeemer, diligent care to preserve yourselves from sin, to improve yourselves in goodness: eternal rewards are promised to such as thus become qualified for them; eternal punishments are threatened to those, who are *lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God* *. Think well of this: and run mad after them if you can. *Rejoice, O young man in thy youth, and walk in the ways of thy heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment* †. Solomon doth not forbid here all use of worldly gratifications, but all such use as we cannot answer for.

Therefore allow yourselves in fit instances of pleasure, at fit seasons, to a fit degree; and enjoy them with a merry heart: but never let the thought of living to pleasure get the least possession of you. Be industrious to check so absurd and destructive an imagination, by diligent application to some proper business, and fixing a frequent return of hours devoted to retired and serious recollection. The mere composure and quiet of them will be no small advantage to you: but you will find it a much greater, to stop from time to time, and see whereabouts you are; to consider whether you are fallen into no wrong course; whether you make any progress in the right; whether any danger be near, whether you are taking the best method to avoid it. No joy on earth can exceed that of answering these questions well. And if any thing be otherwise than well, knowing it, is the only way to mend it, and that, the only way to inward peace; of which our gracious
God

* 2 Tim. iii. 4.

† Eccl. xi. 9.

God and Father is willing that they, who have most offended him, should on their sincere repentance and reformation immediately partake. Therefore often examine your own condition: and at such times also, turn off your eyes a little from the gay scenes of life; take the other parts of it into view, and consider on the whole, what this world is. A very different place, from what those who are intoxicated with youthful warmth and sanguine expectations, for a while imagine it to be. Set therefore in your view the disappointments and perplexities, the cares and fatigues, the pains and sorrows, of which you amongst the rest of mankind must undergo your share: and while the appearance of things is brightest, as the wise king directs, *remember the days of darkness, for they shall be many* *. Not that you are to break your spirits or damp your activity, by melancholy prospects and apprehensions; but only to compose your hearts into a state suitable to that which you live in, and form your minds to be content with few and low enjoyments from the things around you: for in such a world as this, it is certain misery to aim at high happiness.

Still prudence may secure you a good degree of comfort here: and religion will exalt it into joy. For to the pious soul light will arise out of darkness; and all the vanity and vexation of the present life give assurance to those, who go through it as they ought, that God will make them ample amends in a better. Therefore in your hours of private meditation, fail not to renew the remembrance of your Creator; think of all you enjoy as his gift; think of all his laws as kind and necessary provisions for your temporal and eternal welfare; think of every transgression as the grossest folly, mixed with the basest ingratitude; and have *Joseph's* reply in readiness for every temptation, *How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God* †? Fervent devotion from a pure heart is undoubtedly the most pleasing of all employments: for it is the exercise of the sweetest affections, hope and love, on the worthiest of objects; a being infinitely able, and equally attentive, to reward our attachments to him, to defend us from every real evil, to bestow on us every real good, and in due time the full enjoyment of the supreme good, himself. Therefore warm but your hearts with these delightful sentiments

* Eccl. xi. 8.

† Gen. xxxix. 9.

ments; and you will never repine at any needful restraints from earthly gratifications. Only preserve in your piety itself that soberness of mind which is requisite in every thing: that it may not fly out into raptures of enthusiasm, or zeal without charity; but may be uniformly rational, mild, and beneficent.

This article of moderating their love of pleasure, is of such singular importance to the young, that I could not avoid enlarging upon it much more, than I shall on any of the rest.

II. A second instance, in which they have great need to be *sober-minded*, is their desire of imitating others; and doing many things in compliance with fashion, to which they would otherwise have no inclination. Now conforming to those around us in points of indifference, is one commendable part of social behaviour. And moderately absurd customs, if they be harmless, it is very allowable, when once they become general, to follow and despise at the same time. But if you catch yourselves growing really fond of such things, running to the utmost lengths of them, and building to yourselves a kind of reputation upon them; then it is high time to stop, indeed to retreat. For attending to trifles will take off, in proportion, your attention to matters of moment: and if your esteem be misplaced, your lives will be misled. But, above all, beware of yielding, where it may more immediately endanger your innocence: beware of that indifference to religion and religious duties, which of late hath appeared so peculiarly infectious; beware of being led insensibly into such a turn of talk and behaviour, such methods of employing your thoughts and your time, however polite they are accounted, as may weaken your regard to the principles of virtue. Always examine the rules of custom by those of God's word, of reason and experience; and where you have cause to distrust your own judgment, adhere to that of prudent friends, if need were, against the world. But indeed it is generally a small part of the world, a few forward empty people, that make the high vogue in every thing, and are followed thoughtlessly by others. Be not deceived therefore by the self-sufficiency, noise and vain shew, of wretches like these; nor ever mistake their opinion for the sense of mankind: but be assured, many more will esteem you for right conduct, than wrong; and even the silent approbation of the wise and good will do you much more service, than the loudest applauses

applauses of the inconsiderate and the libertine. You may be afraid perhaps of the censure or ridicule of the latter : but only take care to be pious and regular without ostentation or sourness, and by acquiring, as far as you can, every laudable accomplishment, to make amends for wanting that of being wicked ; and there will be small doubt of your receiving much better quarter from such, than they commonly give one another. At least, if you cannot *prevent* their scorn, surely you may stand against it, and despise it : or, if your mind be too tender for that, as in some young people it is, you have another remedy, as obvious and easy as it is necessary ; keep out of the way of hearing it. Allow the most agreeable persons, that would weaken your sense of duty, as little familiarity with you as ever you can : and strengthen yourselves in goodness continually, by the example, the countenance, the encouragement, the advice, of serious and discreet and amiable companions.

3. A third thing which due sobriety of mind requires, especially of the young, is to avoid affectation : pretending, and endeavouring without cause, to be what they are not, and to like or dislike what they naturally do not. While any thing continues in fashion, they, beyond others, are hurried away by a strange desire of appearing much fonder of it, not only than there is ground to be, (which belongs to the last head) but than they really are : and often behave sillily, and sometimes wickedly, to express their passion for things, which at the bottom they have none for ; at least hardly any other, than what they took up, merely because they thought it looked well ; and can easily lay down again at the shortest warning, as experience shews, and be just as highly delighted with any thing else. Now plainly such as these prostitute their share of good sense to whatever happens to be the reigning folly. And there are too many others, who, though perhaps very zealous against these public affectations, have there private ones, to which they allow full scope. I am sensible, that matters of this nature may seem beneath the notice of this place : but nothing is so, which produces real evils in life. It is very true, in young minds, as in warm and light soils, numbers of weeds will spring up. But if they are nursed and cherished, instead of being rooted out, they will exhaust the ground, and choke the good seed. Therefore examine whatever you perceive within you, rather with the greater care for its being of your own growth : and never

tolerate strong fancies with weak reasons for them. Do not imagine things graceful, or important, or proper, without knowing why: or that you can ever make them so, if they are not so: or that any way whatever, of thinking, behaving, or appearing, is in the least the better for your adopting it. Some perhaps may for a while, injudiciously or artfully, applaud your peculiarities: they may procure you much notice, and seemingly of a favourable kind; but this will never end well. You will get a wrong bias, and lose the true notion of the value of things; will lay yourselves open to the designs of the crafty, fall into contempt with the discerning, and by degrees with every one. Youth indeed hath advantages, which may partly conceal, partly excuse, these absurdities: but then they will fix upon you, and remain with you, after every thing that can palliate them is gone. You will have put on a character, under a false notion of its becoming you, and not know how to lay it aside, even when it misbecomes you most notoriously. And if all affectation be thus bad, how dreadful is that monstrous affectation of profaneness and vice, not uncommonly seen in persons who perhaps would like full as well to be pious and virtuous, if they could but believe it would make near so genteel a figure! But venture to believe, that a blameless conduct, though it will not raise so early or so great a talk about you, will, sooner or later, distinguish you to your advantage, which nothing else can: or however the world may overlook you at present, God will do you abundant honour hereafter. *Whatsoever thou takest in hand, remember the end, and thou shalt never do amiss* *.

4. The fourth particular comprehended under St Paul's general direction for young people in the text, and the last that can be mentioned now, I shall express in his own words: *Not to think of themselves more highly than they ought to think, but to think soberly* †. Liveliness and want of experience peculiarly dispose them to err in this point; and the superficial education, the disregard to all authority, human or divine, and the liberty and the practice of saying and doing what every one pleases, that prevail in the present age, have heightened and spread the error to degrees never known before. Hence they perpetually despise the most useful qualifications, and the worthiest

* Ecclus. vii. 36.

† Rom. xii. 3.

thieft behaviour; admire trifles, follies, and sins, as distinctions and excellencies: claim a high merit for accomplishments of which they have little or no share; imagine themselves totally free from defects that are most glaringly visible in them; pity and scorn those whom they have more cause to envy: and thus judging falsely, in the most dangerous manner, of things and persons, others and themselves, are utterly misled in the main concerns of life. Yet they fail not to see, but take a pride in observing, from time to time, that this is the case of such and such of their acquaintance: now, would they but reflect, that it *may* be their own too, it would be no inconsiderable step towards a cure. It must put them on examining what advantages and good qualities they are really possessed of, what the real value of them is, what deductions are to be made from them on account of imperfections and failings, and what ground they have, on the whole, to hope for the esteem of wise men, and the acceptance of an all-wise God. It must remind them to consider over again the hasty judgments of their early days, and review, with a suspicious eye, perhaps many notions which they are very well satisfied in, without knowing why, and are proceeding to act upon all adventures. Most people indeed should have more diffidence than they have, but the young much more than others. It is not natural, it is not possible, that, in the very entrance of life, one who hath taken no pains to know any thing should know every thing. And therefore when such are found, as they are every day, perfectly contented with themselves; absolutely clear, that their own way of thinking and acting, whatever it chances to be, is right; when they will venture, in questions of the greatest moment, to decide, without the least hesitation beforehand, or the least doubt afterwards, perhaps directly contrary to what the ablest persons in all ages have done; and hold every one in utter contempt, that can possibly be of another opinion; this is surely an astonishing want of sobriety of mind. At least be a little modest, till you can truly say, that you have considered and inquired with some care: for afterwards, in all likelihood, you will be so of course. Especially be modest, in proportion as any point is of consequence and out of your reach. For instance, in religion. The duties of it are plain, and plainly reasonable. So are the doctrines too, as far as we can understand them, and judge of them: but we can understand and

judge of some of them but very imperfectly. They relate to the infinite nature of God, to the boundless views of his providence, to future times, it may be a future world. No wonder, that of such things we do not comprehend the whole; though he may have good reasons, whether we perceive them or not, for telling us part: and yet, without comprehending the whole, some parts must seem unaccountable. Now such difficulties as these, or possibly less, a raw self-sufficient youth chances to think or be told of, runs away with them, and derides the weakness of those who believe what they are taught. But can it possibly make any doctrine of religion doubtful, that persons, bred up in the manner that, God knows, too many are, and living afterwards as may be expected, do not understand it, or do not like it, or have heard more of the objections against it than the arguments for it? Or should they not rather learn to suspect, that they have not a sufficient acquaintance with the subject? For what will become of good sense and right behaviour in the world, if people are to think themselves masters of every thing which they know but any thing of, and to despise every thing they know nothing of? This is both a very unreasonable and very immoral turn of mind: it destroys all reverence for truth, all attention to the virtuous conduct of their faculties and their lives: it leads them, for the most part, to early misery here, and hardens them beyond all things against that penitent conviction, which alone can prevent their misery hereafter. Justly therefore doth the prophet denounce: *Wo unto them that call evil good, and good evil: that put darkness for light, and light for darkness. Wo unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight. Therefore, as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff: so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom go up as the dust; because they have cast away the law of the Lord of Hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel*.*

* Isa. vi. 20, 21, 24.

S E R M O N XIV.

THE DUTIES OF THE YOUNG.

TIT. ii. 6.

Young men likewise exhort to be sober-minded.

I N discoursing on these words, I have already mentioned four particulars, in respect of which it is peculiarly necessary for young persons to preserve sobriety of mind, and exercise a watchful government over themselves: their natural gaiety and love of pleasure, their fondness for imitating the customs and fashions of the world at some times, their proneness to affectation and wrong singularities at others, and their almost universal inclination to entertain too high an opinion of their own advantages, accomplishments, and abilities. Were this opinion to go no farther than their own breasts, it would be a great fault, and have very bad effects: but when it is shewn to others, and even demands their notice, the case becomes much worse. And therefore an additional indispensable duty, comprehended under the character of *sober-minded*, is

5. That how well soever they may apprehend they see cause to think of themselves, they should behave with humility towards those with whom they have any intercourse: and remember that, in young people above all, modesty is exceedingly graceful, and a remarkable want of it shocking. It is not meant that they should be frightened, confused, and disconcerted in what they say or do before strangers and superiors: this would be a weakness; though, when it doth not go very far, an amiable one. Much less is it meant to enjoin so strict a silence or reserve, as may bring the goodness of their understandings or tempers in question: but only, that their words, looks, and actions should express a consciousness of what is
very

very true, that they have reason, from their youth and inexperience, to be in some degree suspicious of themselves, even where they seem to be most plainly in the right. Still, what they are fully convinced, on deliberate consideration, is their duty, they must adhere to, so long as the persuasion continues, though persons, ever so much farther advanced in age or knowledge, dissuade them from it. But even in this case, and certainly then in others, they ought to shew every mark of due regard to those from whom they differ. And the most obliging submission is very consistent with liveliness and spirit: it may give strong proofs of dignity, at the same time with respect; and by throwing the most advantageous light on every accomplishment, it will please every one worth pleasing, beyond all things.

It is very true, that quite different methods, a confident behaviour, and a manner in conversation, bold even to great lengths of indecency, seem to take with too many: even with some, who cover their ignorance or neglect of true good breeding and politeness, with high pretences to both. But then, as the liking which they have, or pretend to have, for these undaunted spirits, can be accompanied with no real esteem, so it seldom holds long; and yet seldomer either produces or intends any good to those who are distinguished by it. For persons of judgment will by no means pitch on those for any purpose of importance, with whose empty forwardness they are most diverted for an idle hour. The very quality that recommends them in this latter respect, is an insuperable objection against them in the former.

Another thing ought to be observed, which in our youth, at least, we commonly overlook; that they, who love to be often placing themselves in full view, whatever care they take about their appearance, are apt to have more seen of them than is to their advantage. And this danger is the greater, as whoever desires too earnestly to make the best figure he can, will almost certainly be carried on to aim at making a better than he can, and of consequence will make a much worse than he needs. Great numbers, who might have passed through life with abundantly sufficient approbation and regard, by the mere help of plain good sense and good temper, have, by affecting more agreeableness or sprightliness, more judgment or knowledge, perhaps than they had, or however than they had occasion

sion to shew, become ridiculous to those whom they wanted to think highly of them. But a farther, and more serious evil, is, that where the passion for being remarkable is permitted to grow very strong, if laudable methods will not bring it about, people are sorely tempted to use others: to procure admiration of their persons by improper arts and freedoms, of their learning by assertions of groundless novelties, of their wit by ill-nature or profaneness. And yet after all, generally speaking, these contrivances prove insufficient. Traps, laid for applause, are almost always seen; and so disgust those who see them, that they often refuse even real merit its due acknowledgments, when they are too openly claimed. Now and then indeed these vain characters do push themselves into early reputation, without any title to it. But, as their hasty growth is unaccompanied with inward strength, after being a short time gazed at and envied, they are crushed under the weight of their own fame, and sink back into nothing; while every one rejoices at their fall, and wonders how they came ever to rise so high in the esteem of the world.

On all accounts therefore young men ought ever to express, in their whole conversation and demeanour, a moderate opinion and distrust of themselves; with no small esteem and deference for others, how far soever they may be from making a showy appearance. For still, such persons may have a great deal more even of ornamental accomplishments, to produce on fit occasions, than you are aware of. Or supposing them not at all comparable to you in these respects, they may excel you in much more important things; in *good conduct, virtue, and piety*. Whatever advantages you have over any one *besides these*, remember it depends intirely on your use of them, whether you shall be the better or the worse for them; and be assured, they will never be truly beneficial to you, without humility of heart and behaviour. Instead therefore of the unprofitable and unsafe employment of admiring yourselves, and endeavouring to make others admire you, for qualities of small and doubtful value, indulge but a moderate complacence in the very best that you conceive you are possessed of; think how imperfect you are in them, how many others you want, how many bad ones you have; and far from cherishing the poor vanity of vying with those around you, prostrate yourselves before God, and earnestly beseech him to turn his face *from your*

*your sins, and put out all your misdeeds ; to make you a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within you **.

6. Another duty, comprehended under sobriety of mind, and closely connected with the former, consists in avoiding inconsiderate and vehement positiveness in discourse ; to which the young, who think well of their own judgments, and know little of what others have judged, or on what grounds, are much addicted. Now affirming any thing, as more certain than you have good cause to believe it, is really an offence against truth, though you should happen to be in the right ; and peculiarly unbecoming in those, who are most likely to be often in the wrong. Insisting on a point too earnestly sometimes provokes very dangerous resentments, especially when two of the same warm temper are of different persuasions. And cooler and wiser men will seldom care to venture upon giving you information, when they see you so little disposed to receive it. For want of such monitors, you will often go on, for a long time, asserting as unquestionable, what is false or doubtful. Others will perceive it soon : you will be forced to see it yourselves at last : and then what shame and vexation will you have brought upon your own heads ! Whereas proposing your notions with an ingenuous diffidence will secure an easy retreat, if they chance to be confuted ; and urging your reasons, when they are strongest, with modesty of speech, will make you beloved, as well as admired. You should therefore constantly bear in your thoughts, and imitate the engaging behaviour of *Elihu* in *Job* : who, having first waited till his elders had spoken, answered and said : *I am young, and ye are old : wherefore I was afraid, and durst not shew you my opinion. I said, days should speak, and multitude of years should teach wisdom. But there is a spirit in man : and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding : therefore hearken to me : I also will shew you my opinion **.

7. A seventh instance of sobriety of mind, yet more important than the former, indeed so visibly important that a few words will suffice about it, is guarding carefully against rashness in conduct. Words may pass over, and prove of small importance ; but actions are always of moment : and yet the young too commonly act without scruple or distrust. Sometimes

* Ps li. 9, 12.

† Job xxxii. 6, 7, 8, 12.

times this arises from the pride of thinking, that they cannot act amiss: but sometimes also from mere thoughtlessness, or a lively impatience of deliberation, joined with that peculiar enterprising disposition, and unwillingness to believe any harm will follow, which youth inspires, and riper years find bitter reason to lament. For indeed, what one thing is there dreadful in life, which this adventurous giddiness doth not frequently bring on men, in the very beginning of their days, and it may be fix down upon them to the end? You, of all others, ought to be cautious: for you have much to lose, even in this world; and to plunge at the first step into misery is a deplorable thing. You must be sensible, that multitudes have done so, and multitudes are doing so every day, through mere negligence, perhaps but a little negligence: and if you are guilty of as much or more, how can you hope to escape better? It will cost you far less time and trouble to avoid errors, than to retrieve them. Some cannot be retrieved at all: others, but imperfectly. With your best care you will find it hard enough to keep intirely clear of them: and what then must become of those, who professedly take no care at all, but give up their lives to fancy and chance?

8. Another point, in which it is very uncommon, and yet very needful for young people to be sober-minded, is, in moderating their natural hastiness of temper, and readiness to take offence. It is in vain to think of reckoning up all the occasions, on which this fault appears in them: but some ought to be mentioned particularly.

One is, that they are too commonly provoked at receiving advice, and resent it as an affront. Now if it be given, as it certainly is, for the most part, solely or chiefly from good-will to you: what a monstrous, what a barbarous thing is it, to wound the hearts of your best friends doubly; first by your indiscretions, then by your ingratitude: to tell them, that is no concern of theirs, which they cannot help being most tenderly concerned about; and insist on the right you have, to ruin yourselves, if you please! But perhaps they take upon them, not only to advise you, but be angry with you: and that you cannot bear. Now it is very possible, their anger, or however the degree, or time, or manner of expressing it, may be improper: or, on the other hand, it may be more necessary, than you ima-

gine, or care to own. But at least, it is a proof that they mean you well: else, why should they give themselves any disquiet about you? And even if they do mistake in some things, or go too far in their fears for you, still the reason of their solicitude is so kind, that the excess of it may well be excused. Or suppose it not to proceed from affection, but from what you will, conceit, censoriousness, hatred, if you please; it will be well worth your while, to attend to it so far however, as to make your advantage of it, by amending or vindicating or guarding yourself. And if they, who give you good advice, be your enemies, it will be much better to grieve them by taking it, than to please them by persisting in sins or follies.

There is a farther instance of warmth of temper in young people, which frequently hath very bad consequences, though it proceeds from an excellent principle. They set out with the liveliest sense of right and wrong in many cases: would to God it were the same in all! They have usually a strong abhorrence of doing unworthy things for the sake of interest: and it is great pity, they have not an equal abhorrence of doing as unworthy things for the sake of pleasure and applause. But this aversion to baseness and unfairness, (though it can never be too deeply rooted, and to begin the world with indifference in these respects, is a very bad sign, yet,) if they are naturally of eager spirits, hurries them on into most grievous errors. In publick affairs they grow hot-headed and outrageous; inattentive to the weight of those reasons, and the merit of those persons, that are against them; impatient to take the worst of methods, that promise but the attainment of their imagined good ends; in short, excessively unreasonable and injurious; and all with an intention of acting the honestest and noblest part that can be. In private life the same immoderate warmth prompts them to conceive sudden and furious antipathies on the slightest foundations: to magnify small faults or none into unpardonable crimes; and pursue the supposed offender with most unrighteous resentment, mistaking it all the while for just indignation. Now men of such vehement dispositions, which exert their vehemence chiefly in the season of youth, if they have any reflection, cannot help knowing their danger: and therefore should conscientiously and perpetually be on their watch against it: should think seriously in their cooler hours, how much the

misrepresentations of others, how much more the violence of their own natures, may disguise things to them; and, it may be, have actually done it many times already: think what imperfections there are, in the minds and behaviour even of those who are well-disposed, in their own amongst the rest: think, even supposing the things, or the persons, they are angry with, very bad, whether the bitterness of their anger may not be as bad: think how much better and safer it is, to lean towards the milder side; and how exceedingly blameable they will have been, should all this heat, or a considerable part of it, prove at last to be groundless and unjust. But, next to the danger of unreasonable aversions, ought to be mentioned,

9. That of unreasonable fondnesses: against which the young, if they will preserve a due sobriety of mind, must always be strictly on their guard. They have had little opportunity for, and therefore can have little skill in, a part of knowledge, that requires a great deal, judging of characters. And yet they will enter all at once into such bosom friendships with almost mere strangers, as a prudent person would scarce contract with those, whom he had known longest. Sometimes these sudden intimacies end in as sudden quarrels. And when they last longer, the case is often yet worse. The favourites, chosen so hastily, are for the most part ill chosen: and when a confidence without reserve (for youth hath very little reserve) is placed in those, who either design, or only judge amiss; in how many respects may they misguide, to what contempt may they expose, to what fatal errors may they lead, their inconsiderate admirers! Therefore beware of plausible insinuations and agreeable appearances; allow none to put themselves upon you for what they please; but examine them well, and always consult your old and sure friends in the choice of new ones. Indeed, if you never chuse any, perhaps it may be no harm. Familiar acquaintance you may have with many. A proper degree of trust you may repose in some. But your life may pass, without meeting with one, to whom you can with safety open your heart intirely. And most of the pretended strict friendships are mere interested combinations in the elder, and a mixture of fond fancy and affectation in the younger. Therefore keep on the watch; and particularly against those, whom perhaps you are least apt to suspect, who express the most complaisance to

you, and are the fullest of your praises, especially to your face. If this behaviour be owing to weakness, they are unworthy of your esteem: if to design, they are dangerous. For the scripture hath said, *a man that flattereth his neighbour, spreadeth a net for his feet* *. Instead thereof of running into the arms of such, keep them at a distance. And with whomsoever you enter into a closer connexion, continue still to observe, with candor indeed, but with vigilance too, how they conduct themselves, what impressions they are making upon you: nor think it any breach either of fidelity or good-nature, to part with the dearest friend upon earth, rather than endanger your piety, your virtue, your happiness, or even your character. Farther yet; carefully avoid the weakness and injustice of extolling your intimates too highly, either in your discourse or even your imagination, and disparaging others in comparison: but still more carefully avoid promoting their interests in opposition to reason and equity, to private right or publick good.

10. Another part of sobriety of mind, highly and peculiarly requisite for the young, is a discreet management of their expences. Covetousness indeed, hateful and despicable as it is in the elder, would be somewhat worse in them: but all is not covetousness, that they are apt to call so: and extravagance is a mark only of folly, not of generosity, or good-nature. They who squander needlessly at some times, will be driven to spare improperly at others, when they should have been bountiful: and so will make a truly mean figure, because they would needs make a falsely great one. Then, if their profuseness rise to any height, it creates them great uneasiness with their parents and friends: whom it always fills with fears about them, and frequently straitens and distresses: it occasions (as they must run in debt) difficulties and losses, oftentimes ruin, to those, with whom they have dealings; and usually to such of them, as deserve it least: they must bring themselves into continual perplexities: they will of course be tempted, either to drown the sense of them by intemperance, or to aim at getting out of them by dishonest arts and methods, of one kind or another; yet probably in vain. And if they come to have families, they will in all likelihood utterly undo those, who ought to have been the object of their tenderest love and care. Remember therefore to set out cautiously; consider well, that to rise in your way of living

* Prov. xxix. 5.

living is very easy; but to lower it, one of the hardest things in the world: and lay it down for a rule, that no income whatever can support negligence and expensiveness.

II. The eleventh proof, which young persons should give of a sober and reasonable mind, is to fix upon, and keep closely to, some fit manner of spending their time. For none of it is given us to be thrown away: and unless they apply early to what they ought, a habit of idleness will soon take firm possession of them. To those of lower rank, necessity reads the daily lesson of industry: it will make their condition comfortable and reputable: and if they think of being maintained at their ease, they are infallibly ruined, body and soul. But whatever rank we are of, without some employment, life must be tedious: and unless proper employment be chosen to fill up the empty spaces of it, gross imprudences and sins will be crowding into them. Or if the idle could avoid these, yet surely it is bad enough, that they cannot avoid making a despicable figure in the world; that their inattention, which will gradually produce an incapacity of conducting their own affairs, must subject them to an absolute dependance upon others, who may impose upon them without fear, to their great prejudice, in more ways than one. And besides, how painful will the reflection be to you, (if ever you have any reflection) what happy circumstances you might have been in, what an honourable appearance you might have made, had it not been for this contemptible quality! But a still more alarming thought is, that those abilities and opportunities of improving yourselves, and being useful to your fellow creatures, which God hath bestowed on you, he will hereafter call you to answer for: and he hath warned you beforehand, that *the unprofitable and slothful servant, who hath hid his talent in the earth, shall be cast into outer darkness* *.

All people therefore, and the young especially, should keep themselves, not only employed, but employed to good purpose. Both their friends and they should be very careful, not to direct their aim to a wrong point; for there are unhappy mistakes of this kind. Such things are frequently made the study and business of life, as those who employ themselves in them had much better know nothing of; at least can be little the better for knowing ever so well. But they take up a ground-
less

* Matth. xxv. 25, 26, 30.

less fancy of their own, or follow a weak judgment or silly example of another; set their whole hearts on gaining a reputation in some errant trifle; and so, with great pains, become very accomplished, and good for nothing. Not that slighter accomplishments, if they be real and suitable to our station, are to be overlooked: or beginners in life to be severely blamed, if they do place a little higher value on such matters than they deserve. But much care should be taken by those about them, and still more by themselves, (for who is so nearly interested?) that occupations of mere amusement do not fill up too much of their thoughts or time. Perhaps they are very innocent, perhaps they are very elegant: and therefore even the well-disposed, amongst others, indulge their inclinations for them without scruple. But still there is an essential difference between things of entertainment only, and things of use: and young people should be formed, as soon as possible, to attend to this difference; and should always remember, that the subjects for their minds to dwell upon, the employments for their days to be spent in, are partly the particular ones, that belong to the several situations, in which they are now, or probably will be placed; partly the general ones, of improving their understandings in proper knowledge, but above all, their hearts in the love of God and their duty: and to throw away life upon other pursuits, to the prejudice of these, is not only an imprudence, productive of great inconveniences in this world; but a sin, justly liable to punishment in another.

12. And lastly, one instance more of sobriety of mind, which ought to be sacredly regarded by the young, is preserving and expressing a due esteem and reverence of such as are farther advanced in years. It is true, the natural temper of the two extremes of life is very different: but providence hath kindly mixed them together in society, for mutual benefit. Undoubtedly the aged are subject to imperfections and faults: yet probably you often accuse them unjustly: or if not, have not you imperfections and faults too, upon the whole more justly disagreeable to them, than theirs are to you? Still these ought not to hinder you from being loved: nor should those hinder them from being respected. They should interpret candidly the fallies of your inconsiderateness: and you in return, should pass over the little failures in point of temper, which infirmities

ties may render very excusable in them; and bear with the restraints of possibly too great caution, parsimony and regularity: though in general their long experience must have made them better judges of these points, than you are as yet. But indeed it will for the most part be in your own power, to take off these restraints from yourselves in a great measure, if not entirely. Check but that levity, which raises in them suspicions of you; behave so, that you may safely be trusted; and endeavour to be agreeable to them, as they do continually to be useful to you: and all will be well. Your sprightliness and gay humour was unquestionably designed in some degree to comfort and enliven their declining age. Be not unwilling therefore to spend some share of it that way: but bestow a little of your cheerfulness upon them, in the season when you have plenty of it, and you will give them a great deal of pleasure, when they want it very much. It is a truly good-natured part to do so. It is a proper gratitude for the many kindnesses and advantages which all young people have received from their friends of riper years. And they may make you large amends for it, often in your worldly interests, but almost constantly in such information and direction, as will do you more service, than all your agreeableness can afford them delight. Probably it is not long, that they will continue with you. Study to profit as much as you can by them, before you are left to yourselves: and give them such a prospect of your doing well, that they may quit the world with comfort. In every common art and business, you shew great regard to experienced instructors: and can they fail to be of proportionable use in the science of conducting life, the most important and most difficult of all others? Besides, the respect, which you are now perhaps unwilling to pay, you will in time be very uneasy, if you do not receive. Therefore, preserve a rule of behaviour, that you will one day find your own account in; and suffer it not by your fault, to be lost out of the world in the mean while.

I have now gone through my design. If in the prosecution of it, I have urged motives of a temporal, as well as a spiritual nature, so hath the scripture in a multitude of places. And if, together with greater duties, I have recommended some of lesser moment; and, amongst other faults, cautioned against several,

several, which may commonly be thought not to amount to sins: yet whoever hath a just concern for those, who are setting out upon the journey of life, will think they need every useful admonition for the way. And it is highly requisite, that all persons, especially all young persons, should cherish, even in smaller instances, that soberness and rightness of mind, which else will soon be neglected in more important matters: following conscientiously that injunction of the apostle, with which I conclude. *Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honourable, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report: These things do: and the God of peace shall be with you* *.

* Phil. iv. 8, 9.

SER-

S E R M O N XV.

THE DUTIES OF THE AGED.

PROV. xvi. 31.

The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness.

LONG life is what all men naturally desire: and yet to most no part of life seems to have much happiness in it; and that part least of all, to which living long brings them. In their younger and middle years, between business and pleasure, they amuse themselves with tolerable success. But old age disqualifies them by degrees from relishing either: and at the same time, that it takes away their supports, adds to their burthen too; by many infirmities of body and mind, which often make them disagreeable or contemptible to others, and uneasy to themselves. Besides, in the former stages of their journey, expectation of somewhat better to follow, bears men up; but in the concluding one, this world hath no new hopes to present, and many new fears arise from the approaching neighbourhood of another: both because dying gives terror, when living gives little else but pain; and because the consequences of dying must of necessity be viewed with most concern, when we have least room left to secure their being such as we could wish.

And yet, since, if God be good, life must be a blessing; long life, it is reasonable to conclude, must, in its own nature, be proportionably a greater blessing. For we cannot think he would plant in us the desire of what could only make us miserable: or when he hath ordered every thing else with such gracious foresight, would leave any portion of man's being, especially that which is the maturity of it here, destitute of pro-

per enjoyments. Old age then, how much soever men complain of it, surely may be both honourable and happy: nay indeed we have plain proofs, that in fact it sometimes is so, as well as too often otherwise.

It is therefore a very useful inquiry, since the thing is possible, how we shall set about it; what way we shall take to render that part of our lives reputable and comfortable, which we are some of us in, most of us hoping for, and all of us travelling towards. Now to this question the text gives a full answer, *The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness.* Where undoubtedly such glory is meant as comes attended with satisfaction and delight. It is very true, much of our happiness here arises from things not in our power; a good constitution of body, a composed and chearful turn of mind, an advantageous situation in the world at first, and favourable occurrences afterwards. But still the far greatest part depends on our own prudence. And since virtue and piety comprehend the chief parts of prudence, and without them there can be no prudence to any purpose; the wise man hath named the principal thing, *righteousness*, as if it were the only one, that *crowns the hoary head with glory.* To illustrate and confirm his judgment in this point, I shall endeavour to shew,

I. What assistances virtue and piety contribute towards making old age honourable and happy.

II. That they must be effectual.

I. Now they contribute to this end by two means: laying the proper foundations for it in the former part of life, and leading to the proper behaviour for it in the latter.

1. Laying proper foundations in the former part.

Neglect of right conduct in our early years is the main reason, that our advanced ones are despicable and miserable. The irregularities of youth make old age infirm and painful, when otherwise we might have been vigorous and gay, and enjoyed an autumn, not at all upon the whole inferior to the spring. The idle expences of youth load our declining days with perplexities and distresses, when a little timely care might have secured us ever after from anxiety, and furnished us with plenty of all things against the time when we need it most. Neglect of application to proper knowledge in the beginning
of

of our course leaves us destitute, through all the conclusion of it, both of the entertainment and the respect, which we then peculiarly want, and knowledge is peculiarly fitted to give. For as the Son of *Sirach* observes, *If thou hast gathered nothing in thy youth, how canst thou find any thing in thine age**? Again: early indulgence of ill temper must fix a habit, that will fill our life, especially the close of it, with perpetual vexation and disquiet: Default of cultivating in time valuable friendships, excludes us from the benefit of them, when they would be more valuable than ever: Default of educating well those who belong to us, makes them grow up to be curses, instead of blessings, to our grey hairs. But, above all, forgetting *our Creator in the days of our youth*†, deprives us of those joyful hopes that revive and warm the decaying frame, and sinks us down under the heaviest and justest apprehensions and terrors. All these evils virtue and religion would prevent: perhaps entirely; at least in a great measure. And it is a dreadful thing, that men will not be brought to consider this soon enough. They will not only slight the motives of another life, though it be very near us all, but will scarce look a single step before them in this. For surely did they see what they are doing, and believe in earnest, that they are employing their youth to make their riper age unhappy, they would change their conduct. But all they think of is, to crowd into a small space as much self-indulgence as they possibly can; till they almost destroy the relish of that by excess in it; and absolutely all regard to any thing better. And then, after the gay madness of a few years, what remains of life grows insipid and wearisome; and the reliefs they commonly fly to only increase their shame and wretchedness. But right behaviour will secure us that regard, even in the first part of our days, which we must not in any part expect without it. *For honourable age is not that which standeth in length of time, nor that is measured by number of years. But wisdom is the grey hair unto men, and an unspotted life is old age*‡.

These considerations, though much more useful, when they are thought of soon, yet are never too late to be highly beneficial. Indeed our condition can at no time be either so bad

X 2

or

* *Ecclus. xxv. 3.*† *Eccles. xii. 1.*‡ *Wisd. iv. 8, 9.*

or so good, but we may still make it worse or better, as we please. They who have lived ever so ill, may by undoing, as far as they can, what they have done amiss, prevent the worst consequences of it; and obtain, in a small time, no small degree of favour from God, honour from men, and comfort in themselves: while on the other hand, they who began ever so well, may by deviating from their duty in the finishing period, overturn all. To prevent this, it is needful we should inquire into the

2d Method, that religion and virtue take to crown old age with glory: which is, directing to proper behaviour when that age comes. And such behaviour consists again in two things: avoiding the faults, to which we are then peculiarly subject; and practising the duties, to which we are peculiarly bound.

1. Avoiding the faults, to which we are then peculiarly subject. And here,

The most common faults which persons in years are charged with, often unjustly and inconsiderately, but sometimes also with too much reason, are, artfulness and insensibility, selfishness and avarice. As they become, by length of time, more knowing and more practised in the ways of men, they contract a disinclination to frank and open dealing, and are apt to carry prudence so far, that it degenerates into craft. Their tempers also growing less tender, and gradually callous, by seeing and going through the various evils of life, they have not always a sufficient sensibility of heart remaining, to ensure to others kind and compassionate usage from them. And these are sins of great infamy and great guilt: which religion and virtue strictly prohibit; and both enjoin and encourage the most honourable fairness and friendliest humanity, as ordinarily conducive to our interest as well as credit in this world, and certainly the way to endless felicity in the next.

With the errors just mentioned, is usually connected one, of very bad repute, yet very frequent in old age, a mean and penurious behaviour. They who are sparing in their younger days seldom fail to be much more thrifty in their decline: and sometimes the profuse, when they leave off that folly, endeavour to make amends for it by running into the opposite. Yet, one should think, the aged, as of all persons they are in
the

the least danger of wanting, should be the least fond of hoarding, and the farthest from strong attachments to the world, as they are the nearest to having done with it. Perhaps indeed longer experience of the vicissitudes of things gives them livelier apprehensions of what may still happen. But as no provision can absolutely secure them, going beyond the bounds of reasonable caution is taking much pains to little purpose. Laying up for posterity is another excuse, and very often a false one. For where they have no one at all, that either nature or reason binds them to lay up for, they will be as anxiously busy and frugal, as if they had ever so many: a case which *Solomon* hath described admirably well. *There is one alone, and there is not a second: yea he hath neither child nor brother: yet there is no end of all his labour, neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This also is vanity; yea, it is a sore travel**. Probably indeed somewhat of the industrious and saving turn was allotted by the wisdom of providence to old persons in general, because most of them have young ones depending on them, that need it. And if they have, to neglect them for the sake of indulging their own pleasure or indolence, is unnatural wickedness. But still, sparing and accumulating without reason or use, is both sin and folly. The chief inducements to it seem to be, that, former gratifications losing their agreeableness, men are driven to take up with this: which also they look on as the most certain means of making those about them, for their own interest, behave well to them. But surely they had much better, with respect to themselves, have pitched at the first on such proper things for the objects of their esteem and desire, as they could not fail of delighting in to the last; and with respect to others, it is far wiser to aim at real regard from them, by virtuous instruction given them, and prudent kindness exercised continually towards them, than to be content with this wretched method of procuring by hoards of wealth a mere pretence of regard from them. For they who on such grounds pay court to the aged outwardly, can scarce avoid despising and hating them inwardly; and sometimes long for their deaths, as nothing is to be expected from them during their lives. Instead therefore of
thus

* Eccl. iv. 8.

thus tormenting themselves and those about them, old men should throw aside needless cares, and venture to partake of fitting comforts: enjoy good cheerfully themselves, and do good cheerfully to others. For why should we not chuse to be thanked and blest for those acts of beneficence now, which, if we omit till we die, it will be said we only bestowed what we could not keep: whereas if we give when we might have withheld, this is a voluntary sacrifice, and an evidence to our own hearts, as well as to the world, that we act from a right principle.

Some indeed cannot part with much before-hand: and to part with all, is seldom or never discreet. The advice of the *Preacher* hath in general a very just foundation: *Give not thy son, thy brother or friend, power over thee while thou livest, and give not thy goods to another, lest it repent thee, and thou entreat for the same again. For better is it, that thy children should seek to thee, than that thou shouldst stand to their courtesy. In all thy works keep to thyself the pre-eminence:—at the time when thou shalt end thy days, distribute thine inheritance* *. But then, on the other hand, to grudge those who belong to us the expence of a proper education, or what is requisite for disposing of them decently in the world; to deny them the means of appearing suitably to their rank, and keep them in straits, while we have superfluities ourselves, is very cruel, and equally pernicious. In all likelihood, either they will grow niggardly in imitation of us, or extravagant from hatred to us; or their spirits will be broken, or their opportunities of advancing themselves lost: or if they should do well, in spite of our ill behaviour to them, what thanks can we possibly deserve from them, though we do leave them at last, what they would have been much more obliged to us for a moderate share of, prudently bestowed some years before? And this holds, not only concerning our relations, but all our other dependants, and indeed the poor also: that when they want it, and we can afford it, the sooner we are liberal to them, the better. And therefore the same person, who was the author of the foregoing rule, delivers also the following: *Do good unto thy friend before thou die: and according to thy ability stretch out thy hand, and give to him* †.

Thus

* *Ecclus.* xxxiii. 19, 23.

† *Ecclus.* xiv. 13.

Thus then religion and virtue direct the aged to avoid the faults of that wariness of temper, to which they are peculiarly inclined. And another fault, of which they are in no little danger, but cautioned against it by the same means, is that of giving improperly and unequitably what they do give, either in their lives or at their deaths. Now and then perhaps the vanity of doing generous and charitable actions makes them too negligent of their families. But much oftener the vanity of raising a family makes them negligent of the needy and the worthy, their servants, their intimates, their relations, nay, it may be, their very children, excepting one; upon whom they heap all they can, and leave every one else disappointed of what they had reason to expect, and perhaps in distress for want of it. Sometimes a different sort of evil happens: the aged are imposed on by artful people, that get about them, and ingratiate themselves by flattery and compliance and officiousness, till they obtain interest enough to carry every point they will, in their own favour, or for the advantage of those that employ them; and supplant others, that, in nearness, or in true desert, either stand before them, or at least on a level with them. Nor are the aged, with all their caution, by any means so much on their guard against these wretches as they ought. At other times the fault is more intirely their own. They suffer little piques and prejudices to influence them, contrary to the justest motives, and their own former kind intentions. Now this is very hard and wrong; that a groundless dislike, or a trifling offence, or even every great offence, should change a reasonable disposition of things: above all, when perhaps expectations have been given, and the world made acquainted with them, and steps in life taken in consequence of them. Whatever right they may plead to do as they will with their own, they are not at liberty to act thus; but ought to look on the proper disposal of their fortunes as a matter of conscience; and take into serious consideration every circumstance that should naturally have weight in the case. Nearness of relation is a ground of preference, which should never be disregarded without the strongest motives to the contrary: Motives, which not only we ourselves think sufficient, but other good and wise persons, uninterested in the case, allow to be such. Farther claims, never to be overlooked when we have ability for taking notice of them, are kindnesses formerly received,

ceived, promises given, length and faithfulness of service or attendance, merit, want. And all these demands the uncertainty of life admonishes every one to provide for paying as soon as he can; but the certain approach of death requires the old not to postpone it a single day. And performing this duty, as they ought, is one valuable instance of righteousness, which will give them comfort in their own breasts, procure them regard (so far as it is known) whilst they live, and do them lasting honour when they die.

Another danger, to which the aged are yet more peculiarly exposed, is ill temper. Decay of spirits, and loss of strength, joined often with beginning disorders, which they feel in themselves, before others perceive it, are very apt to make them fretful and impatient: a thing so natural, that the young and healthy should make large allowances for what they may want allowance for themselves, sooner than they imagine. But the old and infirm should consider, that the several ages of life have their several trials assigned them; and this is one of theirs: which virtue and religion as much require they should not be overcome by, as that the young should not give way to any of the temptations which beset them. Being out of humour without knowing why, is childish weakness. Being so, because we perceive ourselves declining, is quarrelling with the constitution of things, and with Providence itself. And though our decline be attended with wearisomeness, and even pain, yet peevishness under these will only add to them. Besides, it is very hard, that those about us must be made to suffer more than is necessary, because we are uneasy; and it is great odds, but they will shew they think it hard by such behaviour as will augment our uneasiness: whereas bearing with mildness and patience, for the short time we have left to bear, what God pleases to lay upon us, is expressing a resignation very acceptable to him, and a sweetness of disposition very delightful to all that see it. They who act thus will seldom fail to be attended on with pleasure; to have, as they well deserve, every expression of regard and tenderness shewn them, and every method taken, which love and pity can invent, to alleviate their sufferings.

It is therefore both the duty and the wisdom of the aged studiously to preserve a composed and even mind; to look upon things in the most pleasing view they can; to turn their thoughts

thoughts and discourse to make others chearful when they can; at least to appear willing and inclined to let others make them so; and when they cannot rise to any height of good humour, to keep however from falling into bad.

But instead of acting thus, too often they increase the moroseness, which their own infirmities breed in them, by a much less excusable fault, a malevolent envy at the health and strength and gaiety of others. Now this is highly blameable; instead of rising from the feast contented and thankful guests, to grudge those who come after them what they have already had their share of, and may still have a further and very entertaining one, if they please; by continuing candid spectators of those scenes, in which their time to act is past. But the pleasure, which perhaps they might otherwise take in such a view, is frequently palled by a suspicion, that their company is wanted no longer; that all about them are grown weary of them, with them dead and out of the way. Now indeed where at any time this is true, that young persons murmur at the goodness of God in granting their parents and friends that length of days, which they will certainly in their turns, (whatever they think now) desire for themselves; it is both so wicked, and usually so ungrateful and imprudent too, that no wonder if it raises great concern in those to whom it relates: which however they will do much better to conceal and moderate, than express and indulge. But then to imagine such a thing, without evident cause, is giving ourselves as much needless uneasiness, and doing the person suspected as grievous injustice, as well can be. Human creatures are but seldom so unnatural: and excepting a few, who are very profligate, they hardly ever think the lives of others too long, unless they find their own made unhappy by them, without deserving it. Therefore let us but be sure to take care of our behaviour, and be our stay what it will, we shall seldom if ever have ground to doubt our welcome. Jealousy in all cases, but especially when attended with its most common attendant, ill temper, is the likeliest way in the world to make that true, which it apprehends to be so. Those therefore, who would prevent their deaths being longed for, must make their lives, if possible, agreeable and useful. They must be doing things for the benefit and satisfaction of the generation that is rising under them; and give them what prospect they are able of being well paid for wait-

ing a while. They must shew themselves easy to be pleased, and receive kindly the regards paid them, and the services done them; neither resenting it, nor wondering at it, if there be some failures in both; as doubtless there were formerly in their own behaviour at the same age. They must endeavour to make the time that young people spend with them not only as improving, but as easy as they well can; and after all, not require too much of it; but both allow, and indeed contrive for them, such proper seasons of innocent relaxation and amusement elsewhere, as it must be known they cannot but desire. They who in their early days were treated with this humanity themselves, are inexcusable unless they afterwards treat others with the same: and such as were not, should remember, not only how strictly they were bred up, but how hardly they bore it, and how unreasonable they thought it.

At present indeed too great indulgence is much the commoner fault, and will certainly appear, (may I not say, hath abundantly appeared already?) to be a most fatal error; worse by far than any moderate degree of over-great rigour. But the extremity of it may be full as bad as total negligence. The one makes those that are guilty of it despised; the other makes them hated; and which bids fairest to ruin those that are educated under its influence would be hard to say. Sometimes the same persons have both these faults at once. Their favourites can do no nothing wrong; those out of favour nothing right. And such partiality is the readiest way to spoil both. To the former it is a dangerous privilege: to the latter, a provocation that may drive them to despair: and the importance of each error demands our utmost care to avoid it, by preserving an impartial and considerate conduct. On the one hand, young people ought absolutely to be restrained from criminal pleasures, and obliged to such application and employment of themselves, as their duty and condition require. Nay, whatever hath but a tendency to make them wicked or useless, must, in proportion to that tendency, be discouraged and prohibited. For elderly persons are far from having the sense they ought, either of their past sins or their present obligations; if because they had formerly vices themselves, they indulge those who belong to them in the same vices now. But then, on the other side, it is a grievous fault too, if the consciousness of their own youthful irregularities induce them, when they are old, to sus-
pect

pect and condemn others without reason. For what can be more unrighteous than to punish the innocent, or think no one is innocent merely because we know ourselves to have been guilty? Nor is another conclusion, though frequently drawn, by any means a just one, that in our younger days we were under such and such restraints; perhaps too, (if we have not forgot) were tolerably well contented with them; and therefore no one that belongs to us shall ever have any greater liberty. But we should remember, that different tempers require different treatment: and even the customs of different ages must have allowances made to them, and in some measure be complied with. It is very natural for the aged to think highly of the practices of their own times, and be displeased with the novelties which another generation introduces. Nor can it be denied but in several respects there is at present sufficient foundation for such dislike. But this however must not be carried too far. In matters that are indifferent it is of no importance what usages prevail: or if a less becoming, or less convenient one, doth take place, provided that be all, the harm is not great. The world hath always had its follies of this sort as well as others: only, when they are out of date, they are soon forgotten. And though we should carefully dispose young people, to comply with the dictates of good sense, even in the least things, because that leads them to do so in greater; yet their smaller deviations from it must be borne with: and to inveigh against these as heinous crimes, is confounding the distinctions of things; and, by overstraining the point in trifles, we lose the regard, that might else be paid us in articles of importance.

And indeed more considerable instances of misbehaviour in youth, ought to be animadverted on by the elder with due moderation. For the heart may not be near so wrong, as the outward action: and prudent gentleness will often reclaim those, whom harsh treatment will exasperate beyond recovery: especially if they can persuade themselves, as they easily do, that any part of it is unjust. Therefore it should be a constant rule, to hear them patiently in their own defence; admit their excuses, as far as they are at all well grounded; and place their failings before them in that point of view, which is likeliest to convince their judgement, and gain their esteem: for till that is done, nothing is done effectually. To this end they should always be permitted the freedom of a decent reply: and if they

should sometimes abuse that freedom a little, taking a mild notice of it will generally be the best way to shame them, or at least should be tried first.

There is likewise, in matters which are at all disputable, another motive for this conduct. Undoubtedly, in general, the aged have had by far the greatest opportunities for seeing and weighing things; and are the fittest judges of their nature and consequences. The presumption is intirely on the side of their opinion: and this ought to be considered much more than it is. But then they have not always used their opportunities to the best advantage. They may have stood still a great while without improvement; and consequently be in some respects behind those, whom in years they precede. It is not impossible, but the notions, by which they judge now, may have been taken up altogether accidentally at first, when they were as raw and thoughtless, as those whom they direct and reprove. Or, however, though in plain matters, as known duties and sins, and allowed instances of common prudence and gross folly, we cannot be mistaken; yet in others, the wisest may sometimes judge wrong, and the most unexperienced hit upon the truth. Mildness of temper and speech therefore is very useful, on this account amongst others, that if we should happen to mistake, we may confess it without reluctance or loss of credit; (for it will be in vain to think of concealing it;) and may deserve more respect, instead of less, from those whom we treat with so much fairness and condescension. When both sides are ingenuous enough to act thus; when a superior in years can frankly yield to the better argument of a younger than himself, and the younger in return behave with modesty, and a sort of decent confusion, at the advantage he hath happened to gain; it is hard to say, which character is the most amiable; and it is great pity that both are so rare.

I must not proceed further at present: and possibly some may think, I have dwelt too much already on particulars, not important enough to be looked on as religious obligations: and that this sort of preaching is not preaching christianity. But I beg them to consider, that the design of the gospel is to make us good in small matters, as well as great; happy in our present state, as well as our future: that, for want of observing such rules, as I have now given, much wickedness and much misery obtain in the world; and when they are neglected, as they are too of-

ten,

ten, by persons *professing godliness* *, their profession is dishonoured, and their salvation endangered. The common duties therefore of common life, from the highest to the lowest, must be distinctly set forth, and earnestly inculcated. But then it must be constantly understood at the same time, that we have not strength to perform any duties, but through the grace of Christ: nor will our performances be accepted and rewarded, but through the merits of Christ. Always remember therefore, what surely you need not always be told, that *as the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can we, except we abide in him: he is the vine, we are the branches: he that abideth in Christ, and Christ in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without him we can do nothing* †.

* 1 Tim. ii. 10.

† John xv. 4, 5.

S E R M O N XVI.

THE DUTIES OF THE AGED.

PROV. xvi. 31.

The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness.

THE uneasinesses of life in every period of it are many, and often heavy: but old age abounds with sufferings beyond the rest. Some of these proceed unavoidably from our make, and the situation in which we are placed; but so much a larger share from our own ill conduct, that the wisest of men hath not feared to pronounce in the text, that an uniform course of religion and virtue would crown even that part of our days with honour and happiness, in which we are too commonly despised by others, and wretched within ourselves.

To illustrate and confirm a truth so instructive and important, I have proposed to shew from these words,

I. What assistances religion and virtue contribute to this most desirable end.

II. That they must be effectual.

Now the first way, as you have already seen, in which religion and virtue contribute to render old age honourable and happy, is by directing us, in the former part of life, to make the necessary provisions for its being so: not to ruin our healths beforehand by irregularities, nor our fortunes by extravagance; not to make our grey hairs contemptible for want of timely application to useful knowledge and business, nor hateful by a preceding life of injustice or ill-nature; nor fill our souls with terrors, when our latter end approaches, by forgetting *our Creator in our youth*. For these are burthens, with which we need not, unless we will, load our declining years.

I then

I then shewed you, that after this previous care, virtue and religion direct us, how to behave aright, when the time comes to avoid the temptations, and practise the duties, which it brings along with it,

I. To avoid the temptations.

Amongst these, one capital danger is that of a selfish disposition: which too frequently manifests its peculiar bad influence on the aged, in artifice and fraud, hard-heartedness and insensibility; unseasonable and immoderate worldly pursuits; in their denying themselves what is fit; or grudging to bestow on others, what nearness of blood, or promises made, or expectations raised, or gratitude, or friendship, or generosity, or charity, require. And besides all this, they are very liable to give improperly and unequitably what they do give. Another fault, that greatly diminishes both the honour and the comfort of the old, is ill temper: sometimes arising from their own infirmities, and envy at the health and gaiety of others; sometimes from thinking, that they are not respected and esteemed enough, and indulging suspicions that their death is wished for; sometimes again, from seeing younger people, especially those under their care, conduct themselves in a manner they disapprove.

Under each of these particulars, I laid before you the maxims and methods, which virtue and religion prescribe, for the avoiding of dishonour and happiness in the concluding scenes of life. I now proceed to an error of a different nature; into which they, who escape the former, frequently fall, though equally contrary to the rule of duty; I mean fondness for unlawful gratifications and amusements.

Vicious pleasures in old age are doubly immoral. Offences against modesty and chastity at that time of life are unnatural, void of all excuse, and deliver over those who commit them to a most peculiar sort of contempt. Offences against sobriety and temperance, far from cheering and enlivening, in any proper manner, oppress and precipitate declining age; and turn the wisdom, which should procure reverence to the hoary head, into gross and often public childishness, if not worse. Continuing therefore to these years in follies, which we ought never to have begun, is exceedingly bad: and nothing but beginning them at these years, of which there are sometimes examples, can be worse.

But suppose old persons only to dote upon innocent levities,
they

they must expect to be ridiculed for it by the livelier part of the world, and lamented by the more serious. That no prevailing taste for any thing more valuable, should be even yet acquired, is very deplorable: and throwing away, in this idle manner, the small remainder of their days, after all the foregoing part, will render their case completely wretched. A life well spent hitherto, would have made better ways of employing their time agreeable now: and one ill spent will make them absolutely necessary. Not that the aged are to be totally debarred from fitting relaxations. Very often, by reason of infirmities of body or mind, some indulgences of that sort become highly requisite for them. And indeed, unless there be very particular occasion requiring it, old age is not the season for men to increase their application to any thing that fatigues them; but to moderate it gradually, and give themselves ease in proportion as they need it. Besides, it is a good-natured part, sometimes to join a little in the diversions of the young; which also we may be able thus, much more effectually than by any other way, to superintend and bring under prudent regulations. But to make this, or any thing else, a pretence for gratifying inclinations, that we are ashamed of owning; to fill up as many of our hours, as we possibly can, with idle entertainments; to pursue them eagerly; be lavish of expence upon them, and make them the business of life; to be continually seeking out for still more opportunities of running away from thought, and of destroying time, instead of improving it to the noble purposes of our being; is always contrary both to religion, and to reason itself; but more especially inconsistent with that seriousness and dignity of character, which the aged beyond all others are bound to support. What may be pardonable, or even justifiable, in youth, will often fit very ill on them: and the same things, done by the one and the other, are no longer the same. Every station and every age hath its distinct propriety of behaviour. And it is a principal step, both towards gaining and deserving esteem, to understand and maintain this propriety. But the strictest attention to it will justly be expected of that age, which hath nothing to boast of, if it hath not superiority of judgement and discretion. All affectation therefore of youthfulness, when youth is over, whether in our appearance, our discourse, or occupations, will disgust those that see it: and be on good grounds thought, if not a sin, yet a
very

very blameable weakness, and that of a wrong mind. People are never justly liable either to censure, or to ridicule for being what they are and must be; but for labouring to seem what they are not, and perhaps cannot be. And as their acting an ungraceful part, will be observed, so they will not fail to have, either such intimations from others, or such a consciousness of it within themselves, as will give them an uneasiness from time to time, to which nothing, but growing wiser, will put an end. Therefore on every account it ought to suffice them, that they have been fond of trifles and vanities, as long as ever it was tolerable to be so: and they should now put on another character once for all, that will be more easily sustained, and become them better; withdraw themselves, like the venerable *Barzilai*, (whose resolution was doubtless recorded as a pattern*) from the delights, and the pretensions that are become unsuitable to their years; and leave them willingly to the succeeding generation.

By this time, it may be hoped, I have gone through the chief temptations, against which the aged ought peculiarly to guard themselves. The next instruction, given them by religion and virtue, is

2. To practise the duties, to which they are peculiarly bound.

Indeed most, if not all, the duties of life belong to every part of it: but some of them are more especially the business of one part, some of another. And the first of this sort, incumbent on persons advanced in years is, serious reflection on their past conduct; accompanied with earnest endeavours to undo, as far as they can, whatever they have done amiss, and rectify the errors of their busier and warmer days. It is very true, no one of our days ought to pass over us, without carefully asking ourselves, what we are doing: and if we neglect it, till we are nigh the end of them, many important things will be forgotten, and yet so many disagreeable ones crowd into our memory, that we shall set about the inquiry into our condition with little heart; and go through it, if at all, with great pain. It is a fatal mistake, not to consider how we act, till we have almost done acting. But however, when this mistake hath been committed, it is beyond comparison better to own it and amend, than persevere in it. And therefore such above all others, as have reason to know, that hitherto they have given

Z

them-

themselves but small leisure for recollection, should now at least, before the time is quite past, retire a little from the world into the secret of their hearts, and coolly think over their own history: not to see, what further wrong things they can add to those which they have done already; not to place their conduct in false lights before others, or palliate it to themselves; but to judge impartially, as in the presence of God, after weighing the various obligations they have been under, to him and their fellow-creatures, how far they have fulfilled, and how far they have transgressed the one or the other. A review of this kind, uprightly and diligently made, may very possibly give many of our actions an exceedingly different appearance to us, from what they bore in the heat and hurry of our livelier and more thoughtless years. Still, if the new light, which we may thus receive, could be of no other use, than barely to shew us, what in reality we have been and are, some perhaps would imagine it no very desirable thing. But as it may enable us, even yet, to become what we ought to be; all must confess it to be important beyond expression. No scheme of life indeed can be more absurd, than resolving beforehand to spend it inconsistently; one part in doing ill, the other in being sorry for it. And seldom do they, who set out with this resolution, execute more than the first half. But whenever it doth happen, that any such, or any other person, is convinced of his past sins; though his reformation must be uncommonly exemplary, to be of equal value with innocence; yet, if it be at all sincere, it must be unspeakably preferable to final impenitence. For there is great virtue shewn, in breaking off the chains of inveterate habits, confessing and quitting favourite errors, and bearing patiently that variety of reflections, which the vicious and thoughtless are extremely apt to throw upon all, who by ceasing to act like them, appear to condemn them. Nor will this amiable kind of goodness ever miss of its reward. God will graciously accept of such acknowledgments as we can make, though we can never make sufficient; provided we trust not haughtily in the fancied merits of our imperfect repentance, but humbly throw ourselves on his promised mercy in our blessed Redeemer. And wise and good men, far from reproaching us with the faults we have searched out and forsaken, will be industrious to give us marks of their esteem: an abundant compensation for losing the

the

the good word, perhaps not the good opinion, of our former companions in sin.

The more piously and virtuously men have lived, the less necessity they will have in their old age, for so minute a review of their ways: but then they will receive the greatest, the most seasonable comfort from it. And however good they have been; upon strict inquiry, they will be very likely to find a much larger number of blemishes and spots, than they thought of, that have stuck to them in some part or other of their journey through this dirty world; which it may afford their hearts inexpressible ease, in their dying hours, to have cleared their consciences and their characters from, by judging themselves, before they go to be judged of the Lord.

A mind, thus humbled and purified, will naturally turn itself to the next duty, which peculiarly belongs to the aged, that of religious exercises and contemplations. These things, in the active part of life, are much less practised than the obligations we are under, and the direction and consolation we might receive from them, require. And false excuses of want of leisure are pleaded, whilst leisure enough can be found for trifles without number; and for too many sins, which consume no small part of the time of those, who imagine, or pretend, they have none for religion. Indeed the pretences they make for neglecting the worship of him who made them are so wretchedly poor, that in any other case of the least seriousness, they would be quite ashamed to mention them. But this it seems, is a subject, which they scarce conceive it worth while to talk or think seriously upon. The time will come, here or hereafter, when they will be of another opinion: and the sooner it comes, the happier for them. The cares and pleasures of life, when they are at the height, are far from being any reason to forget God: but the decline of life brings new reasons with it for remembering him. That calmer season at least hath many vacant hours: and what can fill them so properly and beneficially as acts of devotion and pious meditation, adapted to the state in which we then are? The aged have had longer experience of God's mercies than others, to furnish matter for thanksgivings: and it may be feared have been guilty of more transgressions or omissions, that will give them cause for confession, self-abasement, deprecation of punishment. Then besides, they must surely, by this time, have fully seen and felt

the vanity of the world in every shape. Hitherto deceitful hopes have amused them on, and kept them in pursuit of one thing or another, that hath never answered their expectations; or if any did for a while, it is gone, and nothing new remains to promise themselves. Now then, at farthest, the utter delusion of aiming at happiness, otherwise than by religion and virtue, is visible to the weakest eye: and nothing appears of real value but the consciousness of acting right, and the prospect of being rewarded for it.

These then are the thoughts which alone can support and enliven old age. And how uncomfortable soever a stranger to such thoughts may imagine this condition to be; yet in truth it is a great blessing to perceive the necessity of making that our last refuge, which would have been at all times our wisest choice. Not that, in such a situation, men are to weary themselves with tedious and unprofitable tasks of piety, or fill their minds with a scrupulous attention to serious things, and no others; but only, in proportion as they are able, to attend conscientiously on every office of public worship, with sincere endeavours of profiting by it; to excite and nourish good dispositions, by the use of such books as are fittest for that end, especially the holy scriptures; to lift up their souls, from time to time, to the greatest and best of beings, place themselves before him, and exercise towards him the various affections which are his due: detaching their hearts, by these means, from the world they are going to leave; and forming them more perfectly to the temper and employment of that state, of which they are now upon the borders: not disquieting themselves, if they do not succeed in this as well as they could wish, but going on to do it as well as they can.

The remaining duty of aged persons is to imprint on others, whenever they have opportunity, the same right sentiments of life and conduct which they have acquired themselves. For it is *St. Paul's* express injunction, that they be *teachers of good things* *. Too commonly they take just the contrary course; first, live immorally; then seek for arguments to make their own minds easy in wickedness; and lastly, set up the business of bringing over converts to it. And when the authority of old age is employed thus in serving vice or profaneness, especially
if

* Tit. ii. 3.

if it be adorned with rank or wit, or the reputation of knowledge, it is capable of doing incredible mischief. But surely it might in all reason suffice them that they have been bad themselves : and there is no manner of need that they should add to it the guilt (which one should think there were not any violent temptation to) of corrupting others to no purpose. It cannot be so evidently and so highly for the interest of mankind, to live without principle and die without hope, as to make it worth their while to become preachers and missionaries of infidelity and profligacy : a shocking employment, by which some have chosen to make their grey hairs detestable ; and done many times more harm, by thus patronising sin, than before by committing it.

But another sort, who mislead the young less visibly, but very fatally, and in much greater numbers, are they, who having learnt, in their earlier days, neither notions of religion nor irreligion, nor of any thing in the world but profit or pleasures or honours ; lead others after them in the same wrong way of thinking, and do infinite mischief, without ever considering, whether they do any.

Now the more there are amongst those to whom age gives influence, that, either designedly or inadvertently, promote wickedness, the more zealous the remainder should be in opposing it : which, if they were, they might hope for great success. The judgment of such, as have weighed things maturely, and seen and experienced their good and bad consequences long, and known the world thoroughly, and being now ready to quit it can have no farther interest to serve in it, must be of great weight, in confirmation of what reason and religion teach ; especially if it be delivered with prudence and mildness, and proper demonstrations of true good-will. Nor can there be a nobler way of spending the conclusion of life than to exert all our abilities, and all the credit that we have acquired through the former part of it, in doing the most important service to those whom we shall leave behind us : to redeem our own miscarriages by reclaiming others ; to warn the unthinking, confirm the unsteady, and give public testimony, on full trial, to the cause of God and goodness.

But then, besides testifying in general, that this is the way to happiness, the aged have many advantages for recommending more particularly, sometimes one duty, sometimes another,

as need shall be. And besides what men usually call duties, there are other things, no less really so, which they who have once gained respect, may easily induce many of those who know them, to practise to their great benefit: that prudence, which preserves from sin the best way, by preventing temptation; that reasonableness of temper, and propriety of behaviour, in every common incident, which habituate men to the same temper and behaviour on occasions of importance. Nay, things that contribute nothing to the morals of men, if they be conducive in any way to their convenience or innocent delight, it belongs to the wisdom of the aged to be diligent in teaching; and whatever they have perceived in life to be either good or bad, they are bound to admonish others to do or avoid; that so, when the time comes, they may give up the world to those that follow them, if possible, better than they found it; or however, as little worse as they can in every respect.

These then are the directions, which virtue and religion furnish, to make *the hoary head a crown of glory*. What remains is to shew,

II. That, would we but observe them carefully and prudently, they must be effectual to that end: as far, I mean, as in the present state of things, any instrument almost can be depended on for attaining any purpose. And the proof of this will lie in a small compass.

It is no wonder in the least that those persons are destitute both of honour and comfort in their old age, who have neither prepared as they ought for it, nor will behave as they ought in it. But to have borne the various trials of a long life (many of them, God knows, very hard and difficult) with a spirit and a conduct well suited to each, and be still going through the remainder in the same manner; or at least, after deviating for a time to have returned into the right way again; with a genuine concern for having ever forsaken it, and to be now making amends by more exemplary goodness for past failings: these are characters intitled to universal esteem. And though length of time may wear off superficial ornaments, yet the solid merit of disinterestedness and equitable bounty, mildness and good temper, sobriety, modesty, and decency, serious reflection, rational piety towards God, and judicious good will towards men, shewn in promoting virtue, prudence, and useful knowledge; this, under all disadvantages of any other kind, must

must have charms, to which no one, that is not void of discernment, can be insensible. *O how comely a thing is judgment for grey hairs, and for antient men to know council! O how comely is the wisdom of old men, and understanding and counsel to men of honour. Much experience is the crown of the aged, and the fear of God is their glory* *. At length indeed the mind itself may come to bear great marks of decay, as well as the body. But even then, the very ruins of so beautiful and majestic a structure will be looked on with reverence. And as long as persons in years can enjoy any thing; such regard as this, paid by those about them, in which nature hath wisely and kindly disposed them to take peculiar delight, must support and revive them to a great degree.

But they have farther and most valuable satisfactions, that depend not on others at all. As many as have proceeded so far in life with innocence, must feel from it the highest joy: they who have truly repented, cannot fail to be sensible of much consolation. And the delight of recollecting how happy it is, that they were not cut off in their former sins, will more than outweigh their living to undergo not a few sufferings. Besides, if old age brings on some uneasinesses, it removes others. Many passions grow calm then, which formerly, if they did not hurry us into follies and crimes, gave us much trouble to govern them: many afflictions, that once were exceeding bitter, soften by degrees into a pleasing kind of melancholy remembrance. And though, the longer we live, the greater number of mournful spectacles we must see; yet a suitable provision is made in our frame, that as age increases, we are, generally speaking, less and less affected by whatever loss happens to us. Then, under the heaviest burthens that we experience, it must surely be some relief to think, that there cannot be a great deal more to come upon us. In the beginning of life we have large room to be apprehensive concerning what may befall us during the course of it. But towards the close, when almost all is got tolerably over, and neither temptations, nor misfortunes, nor dangers, private or public, can give us any long disquiet; to be so near finishing our voyage, and just entering into port, must needs inspire us with great tranquillity and peace of mind. From old age, as from a station

* Ecclus xxv. 4, 5, 6.

tion of security, men may look back with complacence on the hazards they have escaped, and delight themselves anew in the gratifications they have enjoyed. For to lament their being past, when we have had our due share of them, is both ingratitude and absurdity. Indeed it is a considerable felicity in our make, and seems calculated particularly for the benefit of the aged, that the memory of past pleasures is agreeable, and yet that of past sorrows far from painful.

But farther still; recalling to their thoughts the persons and occurrences they have known, the times that have gone over their heads, and the wonderful dispensations of providence to themselves or others, with which they have been filled, must be a fruitful source of improving amusement to them; and relating these things, an acceptable entertainment and instruction to others. Years, as they advance, do indeed lessen our activity; but perhaps by no means our usefulness: for to advise and direct is both the superior part, and that for which fewer are qualified, than for executing what is resolved. Or, to put matters at the lowest, how little soever the aged have an opportunity of doing, they have at least that of suffering, as becomes good Christians; of bearing the inconveniencies of their condition with a chearful acquiescence; and being content to be useless, if infinite wisdom sees it fit they should. So that the very same infirmities, which disable them from exercising some virtues, directly lead them to exercise others, though not so conspicuous amongst men, yet as truly valuable in the sight of God, and therefore as sure to increase their reward. Whatever then is the will of their heavenly Father, they are prepared for. If it be his pleasure, that they should languish on here, they have great encouragement to wait with patience *all the days of their appointed time till their change come* *. And if he calls them soon, they have all possible reason to obey willingly; and yield up their breath with thankfulness into his hands who hath indulged them so long an use of it, and knows it would be no more a blessing to them. *O death, acceptable is thy sentence unto him whose strength faileth, that is now in the last age, and vexed with all things* †! Well may such resign their spirit quietly to him who gave it, and praise his goodness, that *they go to their grave in a full age, like as a shock of corn cometh in, in its season* ‡.

To

* Job xiv. 14.

† Eccclus. xli. 2.

‡ Job v. 26.

To die, is just as natural as to be born. That *one generation should pass away, and another come* *, is the settled law of things. Our predecessors have made way for us, and it is but fitting that we should make way for our successors: that they also, in their turn, may enjoy the pleasures of life, and feel its pains; busy themselves, and be talked of; die, and be forgotten. *Fear not, therefore, the sentence of death. Remember them that have been before thee, and that come after thee. For this is the sentence of the Lord over all flesh; and why art thou against the pleasure of the Most High* †? Still it is very true, the manner in which we are to pass out of the present world, though a great part of its terrors are mere imagination, hath yet something in it shocking enough; especially when we consider it as being originally the punishment of sin. And tho', at a proper period, we may have a satiety of this earthly life, as well as of other things here: yet to expect the intire loss of our being then, would be a thought of dreadful gloominess; and were this to be our case at death, it must affect thinking persons, on whom that awful change was coming immediately, with a dejection and horror scarce to be borne. But our gracious Redeemer hath *delivered them, who else through fear of death, would all their life-time*, and especially at the close of it, have been *subject to bondage* ‡. To believers in him the blessed knowledge of a better state shines forth, totally changes the prospect, and makes our standing on the brink of this life, in truth, the joyfullest situation we were ever in: for what can be better for us, than that *this corruptible should put on incorruption, this mortal immortality* §?

For the vicious indeed, old age hath no comfort, and much terror. There have been few things in their past lives, that can give them pleasure when reflected on; and many, that must give them inexpressible concern. For the proper satisfactions of their present condition they have never learnt to have any relish; and the thoughts of their approaching one, it will be hard for them to avoid, and yet much harder to support. A most dreadful dilemma: to be weary of this life, yet afraid of the next; and the strongest fears to fall infinitely short of what there is to be feared. But to the aged pious

A a

Christian,

* Eccus. i. 4.

† Heb. ii. 15.

‡ Eccus. xli. 3, 4.

§ 1 Cor. xv. 53.

Christian, the consideration of hereafter, if dwelt on as it ought, almost annihilates every thing that could disquiet him here. He will never regret that he is no longer qualified for worldly enjoyment, when he thinks of the unspeakable bliss that he knows is at hand, nor faint under worldly afflictions, *which are but for a moment, since they are working out for him so soon eternal glory* *. The punishment prepared for the wicked strike him with no terrors ; but the rewards prepared for the righteous fill him with such comfort, that *though his outward man perish, yet his inward man is renewed day by day* † ; when *his flesh and his heart faileth*, he triumphs in the declaration, that *God is the strength of his heart, and his portion for ever* ‡. There may possibly have been much wanting hitherto of the esteem and honour, with which his hoary head was intitled to be crowned ; but now, *having fought the good fight and finished his course, henceforth there is assuredly laid up for him a crown of righteousness, which the Lord the righteous Judge shall give him at that day* §.

* 2 Cor. iv. 17.

† Ps. lxxiii. 26.

‡ 2 Cor. iv. 16.

§ 2 Tim. iv. 7, 8.

S E R M O N X V I I .

THE DUTIES OF THE RICH.

I TIM. vi. 17, 18.

Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy : that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate.

EVERY condition of life hath its peculiar dangers to be avoided, and duties to be done, but none hath dangers more threatening or duties more important, than that of the rich and great : whose situation, notwithstanding, is seldom considered by those who are in it, as having any thing to be feared ; and is generally imagined by others, to comprehend almost every thing that is to be wished. Now the mistakes even of the lower part of the world concerning this matter, are attended with some exceeding bad consequences ; disposing them very unreasonably to envy their superiors, and be uneasy at their own lot. But the mistakes of the rich and great themselves concerning the advantages and obligations of their station, produce the most fatal effects that can be, on themselves and all around them. And it greatly adds to the unhappiness of their case, that whilst they have many things to divert their attention from what is right, and prompt them to what is wrong ; to make the gratifying of their bad inclinations easy ; and support them in the world, let them act as they will ; they have commonly scarce any one to remind them, if they act amiss. Intimations of misbehaviour, however prudently given, are to most persons disagreeable : but to persons of rank they appear disrespectful too. And such of them, as will bear to be told

of their managing their healths or their fortunes ill, shew a great reluctance to let their conduct, in point of religion or morals, be touched with any seriousness. So that, just where they need admonition most, they have the least given them. It is but few, that can with propriety use freedom enough with them, to do any good: for, to slight and distant hints they think no serious regard is due. And amongst those that can, there are fewer yet that will undertake an office, in which they have little prospect either of success or thanks. Indeed the generality of those that come about them, in all likelihood, mean nothing but their own interest, or their own amusement: and these, they may be sure, will take care never to offend them by giving them good advice: but there is much cause to suspect, what the great, notwithstanding, seldom do suspect, that they will often court them by giving them bad: or, if they do not directly persuade them into sin, (which might sometimes be too gross behaviour) will however more covertly dispose them to it: encourage and countenance them in it; either to bring about some particular end, which they have to serve by it, or with a general view of making themselves agreeable.

To be thus environed with temptations, and probably sensible of none of them, is a most pitiable condition. And yet the rich and great, when they are led wrong, do not so deserve compassion, as not to deserve much blame too. For as there are some things to excuse their faults, there are many that aggravate them. Their education, so costly and laboured in several respects, must have been conducted with the absurdest negligence in the most material; if it hath not given them a much superior knowledge of their duty, to that which common persons can usually acquire. Their disengagement afterwards from cares, that others are swallowed up in, affords them peculiar leisure for thought and recollection: and the vast and evident importance of their whole behaviour, on such a multitude of accounts, one should think, could not fail of engaging their attention to every step they take. So that if they have fewer occasional admonitions given them; it might be hoped they would have less need of them: for their very situation admonishes them constantly, that they are raised by providence above others, in order to be authors and examples of good, not evil, to their fellow-creatures. This is directly their business and trust: it is the noblest and happiest that can be. The labours

labours of it are softened by many honourable and pleasing distinctions, which God hath bestowed on them ; for which he will justly expect they shall make him a return : if it be such as it ought, they will be eminent for ever in the next world, as well as for a few days in this : And how can persons be excusable, that are uninfluenced by such considerations ?

It is very true, our Saviour doth express in very strong terms, the difficulty of a rich man's entering into the kingdom of heaven. But he means, of such a one's professing himself a subject of Christ : which required uncommon resolution at that time, when all worldly advantages were to be given up, and the bitterest persecutions undergone for the sake of the gospel. Yet even then no man was excused, either from embracing or practising christianity : much less now. And if at all times the great have temptations beyond others, they have also reasons beyond others for struggling with them, and will be rewarded beyond others for overcoming them. Therefore St. Paul in the text gives them no dispensations, but only provides for them stronger warnings : and instead of authorising the ministers of God's word to wink at their faults, requires that they admonish them with singular earnestness to perform their duties : the only prerogative in relation to this matter that can be allowed them. But as in general the least offensive, and therefore most efficacious way of admonishing, is by publick instruction, we usually confine ourselves to that ; and the upper part of mankind ought to attend upon it more constantly, and hearken to it more seriously, in proportion as they are less likely to be told their faults and their dangers, in private, to good purpose : and should *suffer the word of exhortation* * to be given with greater plainness and freedom to them all in common, the greater objections there are against taking any considerable liberties with each of them singly.

And as those of middle rank, may yet when compared with their inferiors, be considered as highly exalted, and do accordingly consider themselves as such : all degrees above the lowest, are concerned to observe the apostle's charge : and the very lowest will find their own failures, and their own obligations intermixed of course with what will be said about those of their betters.

Now

* Heb. xiii. 22.

Now the peculiar dangers of the rich and great (for though the apostle names only the former, the connection is so close, that he may well be understood to mean both) arises either from the eminence of their station, or the abundance of their wealth: and therefore the text points a caution against each. But I shall be able at present to treat only of the first: which is, *that they be not high-minded.*

Every superiority, of every sort, which men only imagine themselves possessed of, is too liable both to be over-rated and improperly used. But superior fortune and condition are advantages so visible to all eyes, create such dependences, and give such influence; that it is no wonder, if they tempt to uncommon haughtiness. Even such as rise to them by accident, are so eager to have all the world acknowledge them to be what they are just become, that they often quite forget what they were a while before. Such as acquire them by their own application and abilities, hardly ever fail to think very highly of themselves on that account. And they who are born to them, usually set out from the first with despising those beneath them: as indeed to be descended from ancestors of note; to bear a name which others have been accustomed to respect; to enjoy perhaps hereditary honours, and on every occasion to be addressed in other language than is used to the vulgar sort of men; these things are enough to overset the minds of the weak: and they have some degree of wrong effect upon most; more, perhaps, than they themselves are sensible of.

Now undoubtedly distinguished rank is intitled to distinguished regard: and the good order of society very much depends on keeping up that regard: and therefore the great should in a proper manner be much more careful to keep it up than many of them are. For indeed their condescensions and familiarities, are often with such very wrong persons, and in such very wrong ways, that preserving an over-distant behaviour would, of the two, be much the better, both for themselves, and those whom they are pleased to honour with their intimacy. But when they nurse up the consciousness of their own superiority into a contemptuous neglect of others, and insolent expectations of unfit submissions from them; they have great need to be reminded, that respect is paid to wealth and birth, because the common good requires it, not because the persons who receive it are always worthy of it: and when
they

they are unworthy, they have much more reason to be humble on their own account, than vain on account of their estates or their ancestors. The wise and good indeed will shew them the outward regard, to which they are intitled: but inward they must expect from none, except the weak and inconsiderate: nor will the false appearances of it from the artful and interested do them any service: but their dishonourable behaviour will be the more conspicuous for their honourable station.

And even supposing them guilty of nothing else to lessen the esteem they claim: yet claiming too much of it, or too openly, will frustrate their intention most effectually. For neither equals nor inferiors will suffer near so much to be extorted from them, as they would have bestowed most freely on their own accord. Haughtiness therefore towards all, who are not absolute dependants, is a most ridiculous thing; and to such as are, it is a very imprudent one. For the highest lie greatly at the mercy even of those who serve them, and attend upon them; in respect of their characters, their credit and weight in the world, their fortunes, their ease, their very safety. And therefore to treat those, who are ever so much at our command, with such humanity and affability, as may secure their good opinion and good will, is mere common honest policy.

But one sort of condescension to inferiors may be of peculiar advantage; I mean, listening to useful information and advice from them: Things, which the great are very apt to think themselves above, when every one else sees they have much need of them. *The rich man, as Solomon observes, is wise in his own conceit: but the poor, that bath understanding, searcheth him out* *. Neither affluence, nor high rank, by any means imply superiority of judgment; or if they did, the best judgments often want to be instructed in the nature and circumstances of what they are to judge upon; and indeed to be guarded against the mistakes, to which inexperience, inadvertence, or unseen prejudices, may expose them. And the more important any matter is, and the less carefully and seriously we have weighed it, the more necessity there evidently appears, that we should hear others in relation to it. How attentively then should the greatest hear the appointed teachers of religion: the *one thing needful* † to their eternal happiness; and perhaps the
very

* Prov. xxviii. 11.

† Luke x. 42.

very thing that many of them have hitherto considered the least, yet possibly set themselves the most to despise and ridicule ! But in their worldly affairs too, it might prevent innumerable errors and distresses, if they would vouchsafe, on fit occasions, to receive and encourage lessons of wisdom from those beneath them. This, you will easily discern, is a very different matter from being led and governed : to which the most self-sufficient of men, under artful management, are often the most subject. It is governing ourselves by exerting the rational powers, which God hath given us, instead of being slaves to our passions and fancies. We cannot alter truth : and therefore, how exalted soever our condition be, we should think it no disgrace, but the highest honour, to submit to it. Nor is the obligation of doing so in the least different, whether we discover it ourselves, or learn it from others. If reason hath at all a right to direct us ; it hath an equal right, whence soever it comes. And the most truly considerable persons have always been the readiest to follow the opinion of such, as were in all respects their inferiors, whenever they happened to be in the right. Nor is there perhaps any part of humility, that can give us more reputation than this, or do us more service.

But if humility in the great could be no other way beneficial to them ; yet avoiding the guilt of so injurious a behaviour, as indulging a proud spirit prompts them to, is surely a motive important enough. Hence it is, that instead of *learning* forgiveness of *him*, who was *meek and lowly in heart* *, they often resent offences of very small consequences, nay, undesigned ones, very immoderately ; and some, even to the demanding of the blood of others at the hazard of their own. And though perhaps they themselves began the injury ; yet they imagine their honour binds them to violate the laws of God and man in order to revenge it : which absurd notion they have patronized in the world, till persons, so far beneath them, have taken it up, that one should hope they might be induced to lay it down for that reason, if not for better. But the haughtiness of the great, without being combined with anger, doth in cold blood infinite mischief. And they should consider, that it is the same aggravation of the fault, if one who is justly possessed of superiority already, unjustly affects more ; as it would
be

* Matth. xi. 29.

be in the rich to pilfer and rob. In countries of legal liberty indeed, there is not so much room for the pride of the upper part of the world to bear hard upon the lower. And truly both may thank God for it: the one that they are thus delivered from the temptation; the other from the suffering. For very dreadful is both the wickedness and the misery, to which unlimited power leads: and *Solomon* describes the latter very pathetically: *I returned and considered all the oppressions, that are done under the sun: and behold, the fears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter: and on the side of their oppressors was power; but they had no comforter. Wherefore I praised the dead, that are already dead, more than the living, which are yet alive. Yea, better is he, than both they, which hath not yet been; and hath not seen the evil work, that is done under the sun**. But though a merciful providence hath preserved this nation, freer than any other, from such extremities; yet every where the rich and great make their inferiors suffer a great deal too much; sometimes by a designed and studied haughtiness, often by a careless and contemptuous one, which renders them inattentive to what those in lower life may feel; when perhaps from principle, such as it is, they would avoid doing injuries to their equals, and are by no means without tenderness towards them.

Thus too many treat their tenants hardly, or permit them to be so treated: sometimes indeed from avarice; sometimes from the urgency of wants which follies and vices have created; but frequently, from not thinking it worth while to inquire, whether such mean creatures are well or ill used, and refusing to be troubled with their complaints and remonstrances; which, tho' often groundless, may often likewise be very just. Now were we in this wretched case, we should soon discern it to be extremely cruel in our superiors, to imagine us undeserving of being regarded and eased in bad times, or under the pressure of unexpected accidents; to indulge their own love of money, or keep up their idle expensiveness to the full, whatever we and our families might undergo, whose labour must pay for all; to throw new burthens upon us, not because we were able to bear them, but because they were unwilling; to subject us, without redress, to the partialities and resentments of their agents,

VOL. I:

B b

gents,

* Eccl. iv. 1, 2, 3.

gents, or crush us under the weight of their own; obliging us perhaps to seek a livelihood elsewhere, to our certain loss and probable ruin, if at any time we were less obsequious to them than they required, though on occasions where we ought to be left free. Such behaviour all men would think exceedingly barbarous, were they to experience it: and therefore all should resolve never to be guilty of it, and apply to this case amongst others, that admirable exhortation of the son of *Sirach*: *Make not an hungry soul sorrowful: neither provoke a man in his distress: reject not the supplication of the afflicted, neither turn away thy face from a poor man. Turn not away thine eye from the needy, and give him no occasion to curse thee. For if he curse thee in the bitterness of his soul, his prayer shall be heard of him that made him. Let it not grieve thee to bow down thine ear to the poor; and give him a friendly answer, with meekness**.

Another sort of persons, for whom superiors too commonly will not vouchsafe to have the consideration that they ought, are those who come to them upon business. Obliging such to an unreasonable attendance, making them wait long, and it may be return often, (when perhaps only idleness, or caprice, or occupations that might well be interrupted, prevent their being dispatched immediately) is a very provoking and a very injurious kind of stateliness. Time ought to be precious to all men; and is peculiarly precious to those, who have affairs and appointments to fill it with, that either must be attended on, each in its season, or they and theirs must suffer, perhaps be undone. And were it considered, but near so much as it ought, how very large a share of the time of others, a few of these proud or thoughtless men are sufficient to consume, it would be found a matter of no small seriousness.

But there is another fault still worse frequently joined with this; deeming it beneath their notice, whether such of their inferiors, as have just and reasonable demands upon them, are paid when they ought. At the same time they would think it infamous not to pay what they owe to the vilest wretch in the pernicious practice of gaming, though the law, for the publick good, discourages and almost forbids their doing it. Notwithstanding which, by a monstrous perversion of language, they call these last their debts of honour, in opposition to the former. It is very true, that motives, not at all akin to pride, frequently induce those of high rank to neglect or even refuse satisfying

* Eccles. iv. 4, 5, 6, 8.

satisfying their creditors. But so far as they take liberties in this respect, which were they less considerable in the world, they would not dare to take, and probably would not think of taking; so far their injustice arises from a haughty confidence in their own greatness, and a contemptuous indifference, to what inconveniences and difficulties they expose others. There needs but a little consideration to see, what exquisite distresses such a conduct must produce; and how pitiable the situation of those poor people must be; who, on pain of losing all their business, dare not refuse credit; and yet are in a likely way to be ruined, if they give it. The common method of saving themselves, I fear, is, by making unreasonable gains from the good part of their customers, to indemnify themselves for the delays, and often final disappointments, which they meet with from the bad. But this is plainly punishing such as use them well, for the faults of others who use them ill: a behaviour of which no one should be guilty, and therefore no one should be driven to it; but least of all by those, whose circumstances either do or might exempt them the most intirely from any necessity of such injustice. The care of being punctual in the discharge of their debts, and considerate, for that purpose, in comparing their income and expences, and attentive to keep the latter within the compass of the former, far from being below the greatest, enables them to shew themselves truly great on many occasions, when otherwise they could not: but the figure which they make in the eyes of mankind, amidst all their splendor, for the want of this care; and the poor arts, to which they are obliged to condescend, for quieting their creditors, and supporting their extravagances, are extremely unsuitable to a station that claims distinguished respect.

Another very blameable, and very pernicious instance of high-mindedness in the great, is, imagining the management of their families an attention too low for them. Even that of their children they very commonly despise to an astonishing degree. And yet think it no dishonour, to throw away on every trifle and folly, that they can hunt out, many of those hours, a few of which might do a great deal towards making life a blessing, (which now through their fault is often a curse) to those whom they have brought into it. Or if they have humility enough to inspect some part of their education, it is usually the outward and shewy, but least material part: and they would be

ashamed of the supposition of their taking any serious pains, to plant in them those principles of religion and virtue, on learning which the present and future happiness of their children depends; and their own, on teaching them. If persons can treat the very *fruit of their body** in such a manner; no wonder, if the servants under their roof are treated amiss. And yet a tender regard to the meanest of them is unquestionably the duty of the highest of those who employ them. For our common humanity requires, that their disadvantageous condition be not rendered more so than it needs, either by design or negligence, of which nature hath given them as strong a feeling as their betters. And therefore, of our own accord, we should inquire and consider about them: when they offer complaints, we should receive them; and if there be some impropriety in the manner of making them, pass over that, as proceeding perhaps from ignorance, perhaps from a present sense of suffering; look to the substance of what they alledge, and grant them due redress. Again, when they seem to be in a fault, we should submit to hear patiently, and examine equitably, every plea they have to make. For there may be circumstances of no small weight, in their favour, both as to what they remonstrate about, and what they are accused of, which we may not have rightly understood or considered; and therefore should permit them to be laid before us. Otherwise we treat them as unworthy of common justice, and incur that guilt, which *Job* hath expressed in such affecting words that they can never be omitted, when this subject is mentioned. *If I did despise the cause of my man-servant, or my maid-servant, when they contended with me; what shall I do when God riseth up, and when he visiteth, what shall I answer him? Did not he that made me, make him: and did not one fashion us in the womb*?*

I am very sensible, that entering in person too minutely into the particulars of every small domestick concern, may sit ill upon people of rank; and perhaps be inconsistent with their attention to affairs of more importance. But so far as they can with any propriety look into things, they should be careful, not only to behave mildly and equitably to their servants themselves, but to see that they behave so one to another. For in

large

large families especially, there are sometimes dreadful grievances of this kind: and requisite subordination may be sufficiently preserved, without either countenancing or permitting oppression.

Not that, under colour of gentleness to them, we should suffer them to live uncontrolled, and to do as they please. This would be a false good nature, and extensively pernicious. We may think perhaps, that we shall hurt nobody by it, but ourselves; and even this we ought not to do. But indeed, along with ourselves, we shall hurt the fortunes, it may be the morals too, of those who ought to be dearest to us; for wicked servants are dangerous corrupters: we shall set an example of ill management in our own families, which will make it more difficult for others to manage theirs well: and we shall do the greatest prejudice of all to those, who will probably at present the least complain of it; I mean the poor wretches, whom we indulge so wrongly. For it is hardly to be hoped, but that our negligence about their conduct will tempt them, either to be dishonest, or idle, or wasteful, in our service; or vicious and dissolute; or however, forgetful of their duty to God. And we owe to them, as we have taken them under our care, to preserve them, if we can, from all these sins; to direct their steps in the ways of religion and virtue; and not expose them to ruin here, and misery hereafter, for want of vouchsafing to look a little after them: a shocking instance of haughtiness in relation to *our brethren for whom Christ died*.*

I have enlarged so long on these particulars, in which the upper part of the world are too *high-minded*, to attend to their duty, that I must comprehend the rest in a very few words; which I beg all, who are concerned, to reflect upon more distinctly, and apply to themselves impartially. Whoever makes his rank or his wealth a privilege, either to say or do things to any one that are injurious or unbecoming; or to omit things that are right and good; whoever makes use of his inferiors for his own advantage or amusement, to their inconvenience, and neglects them when he hath done: whoever expects more from them, in any respect, than he hath a reasonable claim to; or makes his superiority, by the ostentation of it painful, or by the misuse of it detrimental, justly falls under the apostle's charge,

* 1 Cor. viii. 12.

charge, as a *high-minded* offender against man and God. And though offences of this kind are heinous in all persons, yet they are peculiarly so in Christians; whose rule, which they profess to follow, is, *Be kindly affectioned one to another, with brotherly love: in honour preferring one another: mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate* *. *Let nothing be done through strife or vain glory, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God, took on him the form of a servant, and humbled himself unto death, even the death of the cross* †. *All of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble* ‡.

* Rom. xii. 10, 16.

† Phil. ii. 3,—8.

‡ 1 Pet. v. 5.

S E R M O N XVIII.

THE DUTIES OF THE RICH.

I TIM. vi. 17, 18.

Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy: that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate.

IN this passage the apostle requires the ministers of God's word, first, to caution persons of wealth and rank against the sins of which they are peculiarly in danger: then to lay before them the duties, to which they are peculiarly bound. I have endeavoured already to obey his injunction, in relation to the former of the two sins, which he specifies, that of *being high-minded*; and now proceed to the latter, *trusting in uncertain riches*: which phrase comprehends placing the happiness of life either in wealth itself, or in those pleasures and amusements, which it is commonly made the instrument of procuring. The prohibition therefore of doing this extends to regulate the acquisition, the possession and use of a great fortune: and to go through the subject fully, each of these points must be considered.

1. The acquisition. In speculation it seems hardly to be expected, that any one, who is once master of enough to answer his real and reasonable wants, should feel any desire almost, on his own account, of having more; that he should take much pains about it, is very wonderful; and that he should do any thing wrong for it, quite unaccountable. But that they, who have superfluous wealth already, should both disquiet themselves and injure others, merely to obtain a larger superfluity,

superfluity, is incredibly absurd. And yet, in fact, these are the persons whose passion for augmenting their incomes is usually the strongest. *When riches increase, set not your heart upon them*, is the caution of scripture *; and accordingly the son of *Sirach* pronounces, *Blessed is the rich, that is found without blemish, and hath not gone after gold. Who is he? and we will call him blessed; for wonderful things hath he done among his people. Who hath been tried thereby, and found perfect? then let him glory*†. For indeed neither the mean nor the unjust things, to which necessity prompts the poor, are to be compared with those, which persons, far above necessity, will notwithstanding do for gain. Too many there are, who seem to account their follies and their vices in the number of things necessary; and though they have abundantly sufficient to live according to their rank, provided they would live prudently and virtuously, will submit to acquire, by wicked means, what they want only to support them in wicked courses. And others, though unable to find out either good or bad uses for what they have already, yet are not at all the less eager for adding more to it; but will do almost any thing to enlarge, what they enjoy nothing from, except, as *Solomon* observes, *beholding it with their eyes*‡; and he hath observed further, that *the eye is not satisfied with seeing*§. Desires increase continually, and cares along with them. Such acquisitions cannot really promote even their present happiness; or supposing they could, yet if using unfair or low arts to serve their own interests be excusable in the wealthy, in whom is it that any thing is inexcusable? No temptation is a warrant for doing wrong; but to do wrong, without any thing that deserves the name of a temptation, is exceedingly bad. And it cannot be nature, but merely an absurd habit, wilfully indulged, that tempts men to accumulate what they have no need of.

But though riches alone render eagerness for more very blameable and unbecoming, yet greatness added to them doubles the fault. For exalted rank absolutely calls for the exercise of honourable disinterestedness. And there are several things, in strictness, very lawful and honest, which yet are
beneath

* Psal. lxxii. 10.

† Eccles. xxxi. 8, 9, 10.

‡ Eccl. v. 11.

§ Eccl. i. 8. Comp. iv. 8. v. 10.

beneath people of condition; who, as far as they can with any tolerable prudence, ought ever to avoid the shadow of a mean action; and leave no room for the imputation of being misled by sordid motives in any part of life. For who shall set the example of resisting such considerations, if they give way to them? And yet what sort of example is there more needful or more beneficial? Not that people of birth and fortune ought to think themselves above all views, either of private advantage or of due recompence for their public services. This, in many cases, would be a false and romantic delicacy; unreasonably detrimental to themselves and their families, and productive of no benefit, but harm, to the world around them. But in every case, to act with a steady regard to truth and right and common good, and, without hesitation, to prefer their character before their interest, when they interfere, is indeed the general duty of all men, but of the rich and great above all. Whoever violates it in private life is almost sure to contract an infamy, that will make his gains a dear purchase. And in affairs of a more public nature the guilt at least is the same; often greater, as the mischief done, or however the bad example set, is more extensive. I am very sensible how common it is for men of seriousness and worth in other respects not to consider these things as matter of conscience at all, and accordingly to take strange liberties in relation to them. But a little impartial reflection would soon shew, that both reason and religion prohibit the obstructing of useful measures by opposition, forwarding bad ones by subserviency, encouraging wickedness or worthlessness, departing from justice and equity, for any selfish or any party end whatever. Were even a general good proposed to be served by it, *evil* is not to be *done that good may come**; nor will any come from it that would not have been more effectually obtained, and longer preserved, by other means. And as for good merely personal, whoever aims at that by methods hurtful to his country, whatever outward advantages he may get by it, will lose all title to peace within. And it will be found, if not soon, yet, which is worse, too late, that his own interest, and that of his posterity, are so connected with the interest of the

VOL. I.

C c

whole,

* Rom. iii. 8.

whole, that all advantages, made by a behaviour inconsistent with it, will be truly *uncertain riches* as the text calls them; will *make themselves wings and fly away* *, in the time of general calamity; or perhaps long before, in the preceding general wickedness, which he hath been instrumental in hastening on; and then reproach and shame will be the only portion left to him or his. But how righteous soever the acquisition of their wealth may have been, the *rich in this world* have need that a charge be given them,

2. Concerning the possession of it. In the possession alone, some of them seem to have placed the whole of its value; *making* literally, as *Job* expresses it, *gold their hope, and saying to the fine gold, thou art my confidence* †: and neither employing it to any benefit of their own, nor of any one else. Now keeping a heap of wealth, merely for the sake of keeping it, is an apparent absurdity. Keeping it, merely for the repute of having it, is a very low inducement. And if laying up against future accidents be pretended, a moderate store will suffice for a reasonable security, and nothing can secure us absolutely. Indeed the larger the fortune, the more room for accidents, in one part or another of it; and the loss of a small part will be as grievous to a heart set upon riches, as that of a larger to another man. Besides, whoever lives only to the purpose of saving and accumulating, will be tempted by this ruling passion to a sinful neglect of the poor and the worthy among his friends and dependants, perhaps among his relations and very children. For that important obligation of *providing for their own, and specially for those of their own house*, (on which *St. Paul*, in the chapter before the text ‡, hath laid so great a stress, and which the covetous imagine, or pretend, they are so faithfully performing) doth not consist at all in hoarding up for them as much as they can, but in bestowing upon them as much as they need. This not only the context proves, and the use of the original word in other authors, but the nature of the thing. For whoever is in want of any thing requisite, is evidently unprovided for, how much wealth soever another may say he keeps for him, whilst he really keeps it from him. And when any one hath made provision enough for those who peculiarly belong to him, to put them

in

* Prov. xxiii. 5.

† Job xxxi. 24.

‡ 1 Tim. v. 8.

in a way suitable to their condition, he can seldom be bound, and is not always at liberty to do more. The care of them indeed is the first demand upon him; yet after this is sufficiently taken, and even while it is taking, there may be many other most equitable claims; and they are all of them intitled to a proportionable regard, by that general precept of reason, as well as scripture, *Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thy hand to do it* *. Some occasions present themselves to every one, and frequent occasions to the rich and great, on which extending acts of liberality far beyond the narrow bounds of a family, is indeed but discharging a debt; which the participation in common of human nature brings upon us, and he that *hath made us all of one blood* † expects we shall pay. Nor will he fail to impute it for heinous guilt, at the day of judgment; (as our Saviour hath given us awful warning) if they whom he hath particularly qualified for works of charity, and expressly appointed the stewards and dispensers of what he hath bestowed on them purposely for that very end, shall, in breach of so sacred a trust, confine to themselves the bounty which was placed in their hands, that all around them might receive a proper share of it.

But some of the higher part of mankind adventure to go still greater lengths than this, to preserve the possession of what they have: detain from others, without scruple, what even in legal justice they are entitled to; and defend themselves against the demand of it, on the advantage-ground of their wealth, or their rank and station; which render it often difficult and expensive, sometimes impossible for their inferiors to obtain redress. A most ungenerous, dishonest, tyrannical use of the prerogatives of their condition! Every one must see it to be so: and they, upon whom the eyes of every one are fixed, should have no little regard to this consideration, amongst others that are still weightier. The privileges granted by law to some were granted for the security of the public good, not the patronage of private oppression. And those, which others take to themselves, of awing or ruining, by the superiority of their fortune or their credit, such as presume to think of recovering what is denied them, are con-

C c 2

trary

* Prov. iii. 27.

† Acts xvii. 26.

trary to the whole intent of law and of human society. Not to say, that whoever hath a spark of true greatness, will be desirous to put any one, with whom he hath a controversy, fairly on the level for an equitable decision of it, and will say, with *Elibu* in *Job*, *if thou canst answer me, set thy words in order before me, stand up. Behold, my terror shall not make thee afraid, neither shall my hand be heavy upon thee* *.

But perhaps they will plead, that the demands, which they refuse to satisfy, are unjust impositions. And without question, if that be really and evidently so, they not only are warranted to stand out themselves, but ought to protect others in doing it, as far as they properly can. But then, it is never allowable to make this plea, without being satisfied of its truth; and men cannot be reasonably satisfied of any thing, concerning which they have not impartially sought for full information, and coolly considered it. They may have entertained suspicions, they may have heard reports, they may have received positive assurances, perhaps from the prejudiced, perhaps from the ignorant; but these things, without knowing what the other side hath to answer, are no foundations at all to determine upon, in matters of property: where it should ever be observed, as a general rule, that though we are indeed concerned to inquire what demands are ill grounded, and reject them; yet we are much more concerned to inquire what are well grounded, and comply with them. Our interest only is at stake in one case, and often a very small interest too; but our honour and conscience in the other. For whoever presumes in any matter, to say, he will not do what justice or equity requires he should do, may in other respects be a worthy man, but in this he is very blameable: and were the same temper to influence his whole conduct, he would be completely wicked. Indeed, to say the truth, unjustly withholding things is much the same crime as unjustly taking them away. And whoever is in reality, as well as name, a man of honour, were it ever so much in his power, by his own authority, or the complaisance of others, to procure himself unequitable profits or savings, without any possibility of controul; will not endeavour, will not permit, that a preference or favour, injurious to any one person in the world, shall ever be shewn him.

* *Job*. xxxiii 5, 7.

him. He will check the baseness of those who would pay court to him by such vile practices, and obviate the fears of such as apprehend they may displease him by acting uprightly, where it makes against him. Far from contriving or desiring to be eased at the expence of those beneath him, he will require to be put on no better a footing than other men; and to be charged with his full share of the burthens of society, since he receives his full share of its benefits. No matter, that while he behaves thus, others, and it may be those of his own rank, will not fail to behave very differently, nor he perhaps to be a sufferer by it. He will be content, if they please to have it so, that seeking and enjoying unfair advantages shall be their character; and refusing and despising them, his.

But besides the sins, which may be committed in the getting or keeping of wealth, there are

3. Others, committed too frequently in using it; which persons of superior fortune and rank must be charged to avoid, and which undoubtedly the text comprehends. For *putting their trust in riches*, is just as much the description of those, who place the happiness of life in the enjoyment of large estates, as those who place it in the possession of them. Nay indeed, as a very great part of the ancient wealth consisted immediately in plenty of those things, which give pleasure in the consumption of them; so voluptuousness, which surely the apostle would not omit on this occasion, was perhaps more especially designed to be forbidden than rapaciousness, or excessive parsimony. And it confirms this, that when our Saviour was cautioning his hearers against *laying up treasure for themselves*, instead of *being rich towards God*; the parable, by which he chose to do it, was that of a person, who having, as he thought, abundant provision of *good things for many years*, determined upon it from thenceforth to *take his ease, eat, drink, and be merry* *. Now this man is the representative of a numerous multitude, who agree intirely in his general scheme, though they differ from each other in several particulars.

Some trust in their riches so very inconsiderately, that they trust there will never be an end of them, let them be squandered as extravagantly as they will. So they set out with gratifying themselves in every thing, and looking after nothing;

* Luke. xii. 17,—21.

thing ; till, having been the admiration of the weak, and the pity of the wise for a few years, and contributed to undo their equals by their example, and their inferiors by the honour of employing and not paying them ; they are reduced from the grandeur, which they should not have affected, to difficulties that they need never have known. But they will feel them now the more severely for their preceding indulgencies, and yet perhaps will be tempted to plunge forward, through meanness and wickedness, into deeper ruin, instead of retreating as soon as they perceived their mistake : which last if they would do, with an ingenious acknowledgment of it, they would deserve to be treated with much tenderness, as having erred only through inexperience, and thoughtless levity, not ill design.

Others, if they do not dissipate their estates in so wild a manner, yet use them principally to minister to their sensuality and debauchery ; vices which men of superior fortune somehow imagine they have a sort of right to be guilty of : and men of superior rank behave, too many of them, as if they had no other end of their being. Commonly they do so in the beginning of life, and, in truth, not uncommonly to the end of it. Yet it is evident, beyond denial, that reason no more allows, and inclination no more excuses, these things, in the highest of mankind than the lowest ; and were all mankind to practise them without restraint, there would be no living in the world. Indeed there is not any degree of vicious practice, but hath its proportionable degree of mischief, to some one or another, following it ; especially as one wrong step leads on imperceptibly, and at last, (as the guilty are apt to think) unavoidably, to many others : and thus the most harmless and best-natured vices in appearance, produce perhaps the cruellest injuries. But the fatal effects of sensual indulgencies and dissolute pleasures on the healths, the fortunes, the usefulness, the reputations, the peace, of those who give way to them, on the quiet and prosperity of families, on the good order and strength of civil society ; are so obvious in themselves, so often insisted on from this place, and so universally acknowledged, (how little soever the acknowledgment influences men) that there can be no need to enlarge on them at present. And were they much less notorious than they are ; yet, since God hath been pleased to interpose his peremptory commands in a case where surely he may ; and to deliver by
express

express revelation such rules for the government of every appetite, as his infinite wisdom saw to be fit; it behoves the greatest of those, who presume to transgress the limits which he hath set them, to consider well with themselves what plea they will make to him another day for so doing. That nature prompts them to it, is not always a truth; for their excesses are often a perversion, a force upon nature: and it is never a justification, unless it be justifiable for men to do every thing to which they are inclined: when yet they shew perpetually, that they can, if they please, curb their strongest inclinations of this sort, on motives far less considerable than those of religion. And for the remaining excuse of general custom, what is wrong for one to do is wrong for more; and God will not dispense with his laws, merely because a number of his creatures join to disobey them: besides that persons of rank are bound, both in honour and duty, to set the example, not to follow it blindfold. Examples of vice they have set, till those about them and beneath them have learned much more of it than their superiors, I believe, wish they had; but they must wish in vain, till they change their own conduct. And indeed, the men of condition especially, have left no room for any of themselves to make a distinguished figure in wickedness, without becoming abandoned to the most shocking and pernicious degrees of it, nor hardly then. But by a virtuous example they may be most honourably singular; for the esteem of goodness is still general, however rare the practice be. And not only the sober part of mankind, but the bulk of the immoral, (though doubtless more delighted with such as keep them in countenance, and often poorly affecting to ridicule others) yet do, and must, inwardly, both respect and envy the worthy few, who adorn exalted rank by an uniform regularity of life, in the midst of every temptation to the contrary.

Another very bad use of wealth, in which too many seem to place (if one may judge from the vehemence with which they pursue it) no small part of their happiness, is that of gaming. Whence it arises, that so strange a passion fixes itself so deep in the hearts of such numbers, is hard to say; whether it be an absurd covetousness, an unmeaning fondness for victory, a groundless persuasion of superior skill, an idle conceit of being favoured by fortune, or a wretched longing to get rid any how of unwelcome thoughts and tedious hours. What-

ever

ever be its origin, its effects are most fatal. That all play is at all times, and to all persons, either unlawful or inexpedient, I would by no means affirm. But that very often it is so, cannot be denied; and every one, who takes a share in it, should consider seriously the nature and tendency of what he doth. If it inclines him to passionate, and perhaps profane expressions; if it inwardly agitates his mind, sours his temper, or wastes his spirits; if it tempts him to any sort or degree of fraud or unfairness; if it mixes him with company dangerous or unsuitable to him; if it devours more time than is consistent with a due attention to the business of his station, public or private, or to the regular order of his family; if it takes up any part of the time that ought to be spent in religious recollection of his ways, or other improvement of his soul at home in piety and virtue; if either by its direct and immediate, or any concomitant expences, it leads him into difficulties and distresses, that may lead him into sin; if it consumes a greater part of his income than justice to his creditors, the duty of providing for those who belong to him, or of liberal charity to every proper good purpose allows; or if, without any other harm, it engages his heart, and a fondness for it grows upon him; if it lowers his character, and so lessens his ability of doing good in the world: nay, supposing it doth him no harm at all, yet if it doth harm by his means to others; if it brings the worthless and the wicked into credit and familiarity with their betters; if it intices the well-meaning by example, or forces them by false shame, into doing any thing, which either in itself, or in their circumstances, is unlawful or unwise: in every one of these cases it is without question very blameable. And whoever impartially considers how he shall preserve himself clear from guilt, as to all of them, will assuredly find it requisite either to abstain from play intirely, or to restrain it in every respect to much narrower bounds than most men do. For the great have, in this matter, as well as many more, trusted to their riches so indiscreetly, and neglected other considerations so intirely; and their inferiors, down to the lowest of those that can call themselves persons of fashion (and even beneath that rank) have followed them so thoughtlessly and wildly, that play is become one of the principal sins of the present age, is spread to a degree that none of the former

mer ever knew, and daily brings forth fruits that many succeeding ones may have cause to lament.

But supposing wealth be neither spent in this, nor any of the gross vices mentioned before; yet if it be employed in ministering to a course of more decent and refined luxury, or in supporting such a pomp of life as nourishes vanity and pride, or in filling so much time with unprofitable entertainment, that little room is left in the mind for objects of importance: these things also the rich and great must be charged to amend. For though their condition will permit plenty and elegance, diversions and amusements, perhaps dignity and grandeur; yet it will not permit their living to these things, their being quite taken up with them, and lost in them. For not only the transition is too easy from several innocent pleasures to forbidden ones, and expensiveness in any way breeds powerful temptations, both to omit right and to do wrong things; but supposing these dangers avoided, yet a life devoted wholly or chiefly to the gratifications of sense, the enjoyment of greatness, or indulgence of trifles, is not the life of a rational agent, less still of a moral and religious one; but least of all of a miserable sinner, who has so very much to account for, and that so very soon. And what our account will end in, if we make it our great business here to delight ourselves, without looking further. *St. Paul* hath given us a strong intimation, when he saith, *they that live in pleasure are dead whilst they live* *. Our Saviour too hath forewarned us at large to the same purpose, in that awful parable of the rich man, who, being neither charged with injustice nor debauchery, but only described as *clothing himself in purple and fine linen, faring sumptuously every day*, and receiving these as his *good things*, on which he placed his heart, did notwithstanding after death *lift up his eyes in torment*, and petitioned in vain for a mitigation of his sentence †: an undeniably just one upon all those who *trust in uncertain riches*, or any thing they can procure with them, instead of *the living God, who giveth us all things richly to enjoy*. But this part of the text must be reserved for the subject of another discourse. I would only observe further at present, that our blessed Lord hath cautioned us no less against *the cares* than the pleasures of *this life*; and that his

D d

reason

* 1 Tim. v. 6.

† Luke xvi. 19,—31.

reason to avoid *overcharging our hearts* with either, is the most forcible that can be; lest *that day come upon you unawares* *. Riches and greatness no one thinks can secure him from death; but they can make many forget it as absolutely as if they did think so; and please themselves with the imagination, that they have *much good laid up for many years*, till, when they apprehend it least, *their soul is required of them* †. Therefore we should often call to mind the Psalmist's admonition: *They that trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches, none of them can redeem his brother, nor give God a ransom for himself, that he should live for ever, and not see corruption: when he dieth he shall carry nothing away; his glory shall not descend after him. Man that is in honour, and understandeth not, is like the beasts that perish* ‡: like them in this world; but will wish in vain to be like them in the next, when all that have lived unmindful of God, *the kings of the earth*, (as St. John foretells) *and the great, and the rich, and the mighty, shall hide themselves in the dens, and in the rocks of the mountains; and shall say to the mountains and the rocks, fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the face of the Lamb; for the great day of his wrath is come, and who shall be able to stand* §.

* Luke xxi. 34.

† Ps. xlix. 6, 7, 9, 17, 20.

‡ Luke xii. 19, 20.

§ Rev. vi. 15, 16, 17.

S E R M O N X I X .

THE DUTIES OF THE RICH.

I TIM. VI. 17, 18.

Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us all things richly to enjoy: that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate.

I HAVE already, in two discourses on these words, explained and enforced the two cautions, which St. Paul requires that the ministers of God's word shall give to persons of wealth and rank, against the sins to which they are peculiarly liable. And now I proceed to the duties, of which he enjoins they shall be peculiarly reminded.

I. The first is, to *trust in the living God, who giveth us all things richly to enjoy.*

After warning them against placing their happiness in the pre-eminences, the possessions or pleasures of this world, it was very natural to direct them where they should place it: for somewhere we must. And his precept carries the proof of its own fitness along with it. For *the living God* must have the greatest power to reward our trust, and he who *giveth us all things richly to enjoy*, hath shewn himself to have the greatest will also. All that we are, and have, and can hope for, proceeds from him, and depends upon him. Since therefore he hath made us capable of knowing this, duty, gratitude and interest, conspire to demand, that we devote our whole being to him; use what he hath bestowed on us agreeably to the rules, which he hath prescribed, and for the attainment of the ends, which he had in view; nor ever be so absurdly attentive

to his gifts, as to forget the giver : whose bounty, the more largely we taste of it, ought surely to inspire the warmer love. And therefore the rich and great, on whom Providence hath conferred so many distinguished benefits and privileges, (of the value of which they seem in general highly sensible) are bound, beyond others, to a most affectionate piety in return : and yet, is it not on the whole visibly true, that these of all others express the least piety in the whole compass of their behaviour?

Too many of them scorn to observe or acknowledge any rule of conduct at all, unless it be fashion, worldly advantage or pleasure. A great part of those who will own, and occasionally seem zealous for the obligations of virtue, or however of some virtues, manifest very little sense, if any, of the duties of religion. Some have never had the condescension, or imagine they never had the leisure, once to think of it : others have heard objections against it, or at least have heard there are such ; which, to prove themselves no bigots, they resolve to believe are unanswerable, without further inquiry. And not a few, who are fully persuaded, after a sort, both of the greatness and the goodness of God, still are as absolutely negligent of him, as if no regard whatever were due to him for either. Yet, if we are to reverence authority, and love mercy, and believe in veracity, and be sorry for offences, amongst men ; why are not all these things unspeakably more necessary in relation to our Creator ? Some persons, it may be, when they are pressed upon the subject, will plead, that they are by no means without inward regard to God ; though they cannot say, they give much outward demonstration of it, in acts of worship. But how real, how deep, how practical, this regard is, they would do well to ask their hearts very carefully : for he that sees their hearts knows with certainty ; they that see only their lives, can form a strong presumption : and no one will ever be a gainer, by attempting to deceive either God, or man, or himself.

But supposing them sincere, what reason can there be, why respect to God should not be paid outwardly, when respect to every superior besides is ? For surely his knowing we have it, is no sufficient reason for omitting to express it : since visible and stated acts of homage to him appear notwithstanding, both from reason and experience, highly requisite, to preserve and strengthen a sense of religion in our own minds, and to spread it

in

in the world. Or could we have doubted of this otherwise; yet, when he hath expressly required himself to be worshipped, both in public and in private, what pretence have we to a shadow of piety, if we either disobey or think meanly of that command? And they among the great, who neglect to honour God, discern very clearly the necessity, not only of their inferiors paying honour to them, but of their paying honour to persons that are a little above them: and would think the excuses extremely ~~frivolous in their own cases~~, which they are determined, shall be good and valid in his. What can this inconsistency mean? Surely they do not think it beneath them, to *fall down and kneel before the Lord their Maker* *, while they can bow so very low to a fellow-creature, perhaps a worthless one. And yet really, the manner, in which they sometimes speak of religion, looks a good deal this way. I mean, when they own its importance to keep the vulgar in order, and their obligation to attend on its exercises conscientiously, for that purpose; but intimate, that some how or other they themselves are exempted. Now the difference in the eyes of God, between the highest and lowest of men, is as nothing: and if any part of the world hath need to be restrained by the ties of religious duty; the upper part, being the least subject to other restraints, hath the greatest need: nor can it be more their interest, that the rest of mankind should have a sense of piety kept up amongst them; than it is the interest of the rest of mankind, that the great should. But if this were otherwise, they may depend upon it, that if they will slight religion, such as see them do so, will not be influenced by them to respect it. And therefore all the choice they have is, either to shew some regard to its precepts themselves; or to be content, that their families, their dependants, and the world about them, shall have none. This latter is the resolution, that many seem to have taken: what will follow from it, hath been already felt too much; and if they go on, will be felt continually more. But God grant, they may rather see, before it be too late, both the wickedness and the folly of throwing off that reverence, which is so justly due to him, whose laws are, every one of them, provisions for our temporal happiness in this world, as well as our eternal felicity in the next. Men of rank and fortune, have a
much

* Psal. xciv. 6.

much greater concern in the welfare of society, than others; and therefore are more bound in point of prudence to support religion: they have a much greater ability of doing it, and are particularly intrusted with it, and therefore are more bound in point of conscience. But what completes their obligation, in both respects, is, that if they neglect it, the endeavours of others will, humanly speaking, be all in vain. There may be some hope, even for a wicked nation, while the fear of God remains in any considerable number of the wealthy and ruling part of it: but when they once come to be thoroughly corrupted; then every thing is ripe for ruin. And therefore the prophet *Jeremiah*, after complaining very pathetically, of the sinfulness and impiety of the bulk of his countrymen, still thought there was one resource left. But when he found, that those of high condition were as bad or worse, than the rest; he immediately gives up all and pronounces their destruction. *I said, (speaking of the common people) These are poor, they are foolish; they know not the way of the Lord, and the judgment of their God. I will get me unto the great men, and will speak unto them: for they have known the way of the Lord, and the judgment of their God. But, these have altogether broken the yoke, and burst the bonds. Wherefore a lion out of the forests shall tear them, and a wolf of the evening shall spoil them; a leopard shall watch over their cities;—because their transgressions are many, and their backslidings are increased*.*

But it is possible for us to keep up a sufficient profession of religion, to secure both public order and domestic tranquillity; yet by no means have a sufficient sense of it, for obtaining eternal life: and what will the former avail us without the latter? It is not a merely prudential and political piety; it is not one, that will only form our behaviour into an outward regularity, or affect our hearts transiently now and then, that will stand us in stead hereafter: it must be a fixed inward principle, that moves us effectually to look beyond every thing in this world, to God the fountain of all good; and to take him for *our hope and our portion in the land of the living*†. He offers himself for such, and surely we ought to accept the offer. He is able to make us happy, and nothing else is: whatever earthly good we have most pleasure in, quickly fails: or if it did not, in a few

* Jer. v. 4,—6.

† Psal. cxlii. 6.

few years life itself will fail: and *what is our hope, when God taketh away our soul* *? In that awful hour, if we have not him to trust in, we shall have nothing; and the foundation must be laid now, if we would build upon it then. But honours, riches, and pleasures unaccountably turn away mens attention from these obvious truths; and present them with such temptations, to trust in themselves and the external advantages of their condition, for all the happiness they need; that they cannot be admonished too often, to *trust only in the living God*; and that, only in such a manner, as he hath declared they safely may.

Some have a bold and irreverent confidence, that all is well with them in respect to the divine favour, on no other ground than that they are guilty of only such faults, as the generality of the world are: as if God would not dare to punish a majority; and men might be as wicked as they would, provided there were but enough of them so. But over and above this, persons of rank seem extremely apt to think, that they shall be treated with peculiar indulgence: whereas indeed, since *much hath been given them, much will be required of them* †; and in comparison, *mercy will soon pardon the meanest, but the mighty shall be mightily tormented* ‡. Others acknowledge the necessity of a virtuous life for all men, but indulgently presume their own to have been so, which in strictness hath been far otherwise; and then *trusting in themselves that they are righteous* §, imagine God their debtor. Or if they do confess they have been faulty; repentance and amendment, (which they apprehend to be sufficiently in their own power at any time) they conceive, immediately blots out all, and gives them a claim of right to pardon and reward. Now on the contrary, reason itself shews, that forgiveness is an act of mere voluntary mercy: and that nothing is due from justice, even to a creature perfectly obedient, but that his being be not made, on the whole, worse than not being. To this, experience adds, that our best obedience is very imperfect: and agreeably to both, the gospel teaches, that *by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified; for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God: that we are justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is* in

* Job xxvii. 8.

† Luke xii. 48.

‡ Wisd. vi. 6.

§ Luke xviii. 9.

in Jesus Christ, whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation, through faith in his blood; that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus*. It teaches also, that we are not sufficient of ourselves, even to think any thing; but our sufficiency is of God†. That by his grace we are what we are; and when we perform good works, it is not we, but the grace of God which is with us‡; and proceeds from his Holy Spirit, whom he will give to them that ask him§.

A doctrine, which so intirely excludes boasting||, must be very disagreeable to human pride in general: but especially mortifying to those, whom the flattery of the world, and of their own hearts, hath accustomed to consider themselves in a light, extremely different from that of miserable sinners. For this reason, amongst others, in the early ages not many mighty, not many noble, were called¶ effectively: and down to the present, worldly greatness hath ever been a powerful obstacle to christian humility, in faith, as well as practice. What our Saviour said to the Jews, *How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour, which cometh from God only***, holds but too true concerning the upper part of those who call themselves his disciples. They therefore should apply with peculiar care, to become such indeed; by looking into their own breasts, and considering well their need of the divine mercy; casting down imaginations, and every high thing, that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God; and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ††. Trusting in ourselves, can afford us only a false peace for a time, which will ruin us at last: but whoso putteth his trust in the Lord, mercy embraceth him on every side‡‡. He hath a covenant-right to pardon and comfort, assistance in all good, protection from all evil, and everlasting life to crown the whole.

But then to make his title sure, he must exert his trust in all circumstances, and walk by faith not by sight§§. Even good persons are strangely apt to lay much too great a stress on worldly advantages. Hence it is, that they desire them so earnestly,

* Rom. iii. 20,—26.

† 2 Cor. iii. 5.

‡ 1 Cor. xv. 10.

§ Luke xi. 13.

|| Rom. iii. 27.

¶ 1 Cor. i. 26.

** John v. 44.

†† 2 Cor. x. 5.

‡‡ Ps. xxxii. 10.

§§ 2 Cor. v. 7.

neftly, and delight in them fo highly; without confidering, that God and a good confcience, can make us far happier without them, than others are with them. Were we but convinced of this, we fhould feel with what juftice the pfalmift pours contempt on the vehement purfuers of what this earth hath to give. *There be many that fay, who will fhew us any good? but, Lord lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us. Thou haft put gladnefs in my heart, more than in the time, that their corn and their wine increafed. I will lay me down in peace; and take my reft: for it is thou, Lord, only, that makeft me dwell in fafety* *. For want of reflecting on whom we depend, we are apt to be elated in our *prosperity*, and fay we *fhall never be moved*; when indeed it is the Lord of his goodnefs that hath made our bill fo *ftong*; and the moment he turns his face from us, we *fhall be troubled* †. From the fame caufe we are apt to be dejected when afflictions befall us, or dangers threaten us; forgetting, that though *great and many are the troubles of the righteous, the Lord delivereth him out of them all* ‡ in this world, if it be expedient for him; if not, he fhall be fupported under them, and they fhall increafe his reward in the next. But the wicked God *fhall destroy for ever, and root them out of the land of the living: the righteous alfo fhall fee it and fear, and fay*, with awful approbation of the Divine juftice, *Lo, this is the man that took not God for his ftrenth, but trusted unto the multitude of his riches, and ftrenthened himfelf in his wickednefs* §.

We fhould all therefore learn to live more to our Maker; to imprint on our hearts, and exert in our whole behaviour, a ftonger fenfe of his prefent providence, and future rewards. It would be a direction, a fecurity, an improvement, a comfort to us, beyond expreffion. But efpecially they, who have the greateft number of interefting and pleafing objects in this world to fix their thoughts upon; they, who may feem to have the leaft need of looking further, have indeed the greateft, to be frequently charged, as the Jews were by *Mofes*; *Beware left when thou haft eaten and art full, and haft built goodly houfes and dwelt therein; and when thy filver and thy gold is increafed, and all thou haft is multiplied, then thine heart be lifted up,*
E e and

* Pfal. iv. 6,—9.

† Pfal. xxx. 6, 7.

‡ Pfal. xxxiv. 19.

§ Pfal. lli. 6, 7, 8.

*and thou forget the Lord thy God**. Now if those persons forget him, who have the most reason to remember him thankfully, it is double guilt, and indeed proportionable folly. For what can be more obvious, than that considering all our good things, as the marks of his kindness to us, must unspeakably enhance their value; nor can it lay us under any other than beneficial restraints in the use of them. Then besides how naturally doth this consideration lead us forward to the yet more delightful one, of that sweet security, in which we may live here under the superintendency of so gracious a being; and of those infinitely better things, which he hath yet in store for us hereafter. *This God is our God for ever and ever. He shall be our guide unto death*†. *Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and after that receive me with glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee?* and there is none upon earth, that I desire in comparison of thee. *My heart and my flesh faileth, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever*‡. There is nothing enthusiastic, nothing extravagant, in such reflections and feelings as these, when they are grounded on good evidence of our title to God's favour; and in that case we cannot act a more pious or more rational part, than to indulge and enjoy them. Only we must not dwell upon contemplation so as to forget action; but, as the psalmist directs, *Trust in the Lord, and be doing good*§. Agreeably to which rule,

2. The second duty prescribed in the text, as peculiarly necessary for the rich and great, is *that they do good, that they be rich in good works*. Extensive and important as this duty is, its nature is so well understood, and the motives for practising it so obvious, as to make it unnecessary for me to enlarge particularly upon it. And indeed if men of rank and fortune observe duly the preceding part of the apostle's charge, they will easily be induced to observe the concluding one. If they are neither so *high-minded* as to neglect and despise their fellow creatures; nor so selfish as to *trust in uncertain riches*, in the acquisition, the possession or voluptuous enjoyment of them, for their happiness, but expect it only from their acceptance with the *living God*; they will naturally imitate him whom they desire to please, particularly in his beneficence, the most amiable

* Deut. viii. 11,—14.

† Psal. xlviii. 14.

‡ Psal. lxxiii. 23, 24, 25.

§ Psal. xxxvii. 3.

amiable of all his perfections. And it is not by their wealth only that they are able, and therefore called to do good, but by their whole behaviour, by the example of their piety and justice, their abstinence from criminal and imprudent pleasures; by an active, yet mild, public spirit, and an honourable disinterestedness in private life, united with a decent frugality; by attention to the interests, present and future, of their families, their friends and dependants; conducted in such manner, as always to be consistent with a general care, to encourage and recommend worthy persons and actions, and treat the unworthy with the disapprobation and contempt which they deserve. These are methods, by which those of rank and influence may do much greater service to mankind than large liberalities would do; and by a contrary behaviour, in any one of the above-mentioned instances, they may easily be authors of more mischief than their whole estates would compensate for. Now the apostle hath determined, that *though they bestow all their goods, to feed the poor*, yet if they *have not the charity* to act in other respects as they ought, *it will profit them nothing* *.

But still, though almsgiving is by no means the whole of beneficence, yet it is an essential part in those whom God hath qualified for it. And he hath *given them all things richly* and in plenty, not merely for themselves *to enjoy*, in the vulgar sense, but that others may enjoy a due share of them, and they the pleasure of imparting it; the worthiest and highest enjoyment of wealth that can be. This therefore is the purpose for which we should remember we are intrusted with it, and be bountiful in proportion to the trust; for to withhold but part of what is due, knowingly, is the same kind, though not the same degree of unfaithfulness, as to withhold the whole. Indeed how much exactly is due, God hath no where determined; nor could there, in the midst of so great a variety of circumstances, have been given particular rules, fitted to every case; nor hath any pious mind, that endeavours to judge and act as rightly as it can, the least reason to be anxious for want of a more precise knowledge, where it is not to be had. But, in general, that both our charity and our generosity should bear some decent and liberal proportion to our abilities, and the *rich in this world be rich in good works* also, not only the text

E e 2

enjoins,

* 1 Cor. xiii. 3.

enjoins, but common reason dictates; and if we are deficient, the *poor widow*, with her *two mites* *, will far outdo us in that very virtue, by the practice of which our Maker justly expects we should appear distinguished.

Nor is it sufficient for the rich to give plentifully, but they must do it, on every fit occasion, speedily; *be ready to distribute*, and not stay till the circumstances of the poor are beyond recovery, or their spirits broken under the weight of their misfortunes, but make haste to help them, and, as far as possible, prevent distress. *Say not unto thy neighbour, Go and come again, and to-morrow I will give, when thou hast it by thee †, and delay not to shew him mercy ‡.* Nor is it enough to be outwardly expeditious, but we must be inwardly *willing to communicate*; not part with our benefactions *grudgingly and of necessity*, as obeying the divine command merely because we dare not disobey it; *for God loveth a cheerful giver §.* To the poor indeed it is all one from what principle we give, but to us the difference is infinite. In the heart lies all the value. Ever so little will be accepted of heaven, if it proceed from a mind that would gladly have done more; and ever so much will be despised, if we secretly wish we could have saved it. St. Paul's exhortation therefore is of unspeakable importance: *He that sheweth mercy, let him do it with cheerfulness **.* And indeed, what can we have more cause to rejoice in doing? It is very comfortable to think that we are able; it is delightful to think, that by our means the miseries of God's creation are lessened; it is no small satisfaction to be loved and blessed in this world, but it is the greatest possible *to lay up in store for ourselves a good foundation against the next, that we may lay hold on eternal life ††*, and have it said to us by our judge at the last day, *Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord ††.*

* Mark xii. 42.

† Prov. iii. 28.

‡ Eccclus. xxix. 8.

§ 2 Cor. ix. 7.

** Rom. xii. 8.

†† 1 Tim. vi. 19.

†† Matth. xxv. 21.

S E R M O N XX.

THE DUTIES OF THE POOR.

MATTH. xi 5.

And the poor have the gospel preached to them.

THESE words are part of our Saviour's answer to the disciples of *John* the Baptist, who came to inquire, whether Jesus were himself the Messiah, or only a prophet commissioned to foretell his coming. For it appears from the first chapter of St. *John's* gospel, that many of the Jews expected, besides *Elias*, another prophet to precede or accompany their great deliverer; mistaking perhaps the prophet described, *Deut.* xviii. for an attendant of the Messiah, instead of the Messiah himself, whom they were apt to consider only in the character of a king. And as Jesus had now manifested himself some time to the world, without taking this character upon him, it was natural enough for *John's* disciples to imagine, that perhaps he came in the other only. *John* himself indeed knew, and probably had told them the contrary; but finding them still desirous of further satisfaction, was extremely willing they should have it: and to make the inquiry as easy to them as possible, directs them to propose the question, not in their own name, but in his. On their doing it, Jesus performs in their sight a considerable number of his usual beneficent miracles, joined, as it should seem, with suitable instructions; and then, without declaring himself expressly, (which he chose, for wise and kind reasons to avoid before the multitude) dismisses them with an answer, taken, the greatest part of it, out of the words of *Isaiah*; in which he had foretold, that the Messiah should perform just such miracles, and give just such instructions.

For

For we read, that *in that same hour he cured many of their infirmities and plagues, and unto many that were blind he gave sight* *. Then he answered and said unto them, *Go and shew John again those things, which ye do hear and see. The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.*

The prediction of his applying himself peculiarly to instruct the lower part of the world, it is probable, he purposely reserved to the last place; because his doing it, (besides its being the completion of a prophecy) was, though not a miracle, as the last were, yet a singular proof, both of the humanity of his temper and doctrine, and of his disinterestedness too. For this method was incapable of doing him service, and in fact did him no small prejudice with those, who had the power of that nation in their hands. The Jewish teachers and rulers, who were the same, kept the common sort at a very great distance; and on that, amongst other accounts, were highly revered by them. The familiarities therefore, to which Jesus condescended, immediately set all these against him; and furnished them with an opportunity of representing him and his disciples as equally contemptible. Thus, when their own officers, (whom it seems his discourses had struck as powerfully as they did the rest of the multitude) could not help applauding him before their faces. *Never man spake like this man*; their answer is, *Have any of the rulers, or the Pharisees, believed on him? This people, which knoweth not the law, are cursed* †. But indeed the humble and unbiassed minds of the illiterate are much better judges of truth, when proposed to them, than such as are blinded with learned prejudice, worldly interest, or sensual pleasures. To the former therefore principally our Saviour vouchsafed his instructions, grieving to see them *scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd* ‡; and they, receiving his doctrine into *honest and good hearts* §, became in great numbers his followers: and at first were almost the only ones he had. For St. Luke tells us, *he lifted up his eyes on his disciples and said, Blessed be ye poor, for yours is the kingdom of God* ¶. The gospel indeed makes all blessed who receive it,

both

* Luke vii. 21.

† John vii. 45,—49.

‡ Matth. ix. 36.

§ Luke viii. 15.

¶ Luke vi. 20.

both by its useful precepts, and its gracious promises; yet the poor especially, as they have most need of those directions and supports in this life, and assurances of happiness in the next, which it communicates. But then, to receive them, they must be not only poor, but his disciples. It is not being in a low condition, but being virtuous and pious in that condition, that intitles persons to God's favour, as it is not being wealthy and great, but making an ill use of wealth and greatness, that provokes his displeasure. So that the happiest or the wretchedest here, may, according as they behave, be infinitely more happy or wretched hereafter. Our Saviour therefore, we find, in St. *Matthew* expresses himself thus: *Blessed are the poor in spirit* *, they, whose dispositions are suited to their mean circumstances, reasonable and resigned, lowly and submissive.

Preaching the gospel to the poor comprehends therefore, of necessity, instructing them in the duties, as well as the comforts, belonging to their state. And as our Lord and Master did both, so should his ministers. The duties of the rich and great I have lately recounted, and pressed upon them, very freely from this place. And now, I hope, you, that are the inferior part of the world, will patiently bear, in your turn, the same well-meaning plainness of speech that your betters have borne; and make the proper use of it, as God grant them to do. Under the general term, *poor*, is contained a considerable variety of degrees; each therefore should apply peculiarly to themselves the precepts that peculiarly belong to them, and take no offence at the rest. Of such as are common to all, they may all reap the benefit; and the highest may receive some admonition from what is said to the lowest; as it will contribute to regulate, not only their way of thinking and behaving to their inferiors, but their temper and conduct in other respects. For to be *poor in spirit*, a very different thing from mean-spiritedness, is incumbent on the wealthiest and the noblest.

1. The first duty to be enjoined you, is contentedness in your poverty. A hard saying, you will be apt to think, when scarce any one is contented in the midst of riches and honours. But the discontent of such, you will own, is without reason. And if it can at all arise from mere humour, without any thing

* *Matth. v. 3.*

thing in fact to justify it, possibly yours may be unjustifiable too. In order to try then, whether it be or not, let us consider what ground for complaint you can alledge.

That some should have greater plenty than others, is no more a hardship, than that some should have better health or understandings, or longer lives. If there could be a claim of right to any of these things, all men would have an equal claim; but as they are intirely the free gifts of God, he may certainly give them in what proportion he pleases. He hath made some orders of beings, as we see with our eyes, much lower than the lowest of men; he hath made others, as we are taught in scripture, much higher than the highest of men: and doubtless he could have made them unspeakably higher than they are. If then any part of the creation may complain of mere inferiority, every part may complain without end. If any part may complain merely because it suffers something, no part, that we are acquainted with, is exempt from all suffering. And amongst other evils, why may not God permit some to feel poverty?

Indeed, without perpetual miracles, how can it be prevented? For supposing equality of circumstances were to be established at this very time, it could never subsist. One person would be industrious and prudent, and mend his affairs; another, negligent, or injudicious, and ruin them. Now that each should possess for his own, what his own care and labour hath acquired, is no more than strict justice; that what each dies possessed of, should descend to his own children and relations, preferably to others, is surely but reasonable. And yet from hence will of course follow, by degrees, all the wealth, and all the poverty, that we now see.

The first Christians indeed at *Jerusalem* had all their possessions in common*; but this neither appears to have been their practice any where else, nor to have lasted there, nor to have been designed to last, nor to have been more than a voluntary agreement. For St. Peter tells *Ananias* and *Sapphira*, that they needed not unless they pleased, either to have sold their land, or put any of the purchase-money into the common stock; but that pretending they had put it in all, (which intitled them to a maintenance) when indeed they had secreted

2

* Acts ii. 44, 45. iv. 34, 35.

a part, and how large a part we know not, was an impious fraud *. Community of goods, therefore, was no command then; and very soon after we find, in the New Testament, the distinction of rich and poor established and allowed every where amongst believers. Nor can the destroying of it be attempted, without the most dreadful injustice, confusions, and mischiefs in human society; nor could the attempt succeed. And even supposing every one were to agree in the scheme, who can say what would follow upon it? In all likelihood, so universal a neglect of industry, that but few of the present conveniences of life would be provided; and perhaps mankind in general would be more destitute than most of the poor are now.

If then there must be high and low in the world, why is it harder that you should be of the latter sort than that others should? Were they in your place, ought not they to be content? And if so, why ought not you now? It may be, notwithstanding the different appearances you make, the difference of your happiness is very small; or possibly you have the most. The pleasures, for which you envy the great, are usually very tasteless to them; and would be so to you very soon, if you were in their place. Then, amidst all that they seem to enjoy, you little know what many of them suffer, and how much of it they suffer from being in the station they are. You will say indeed, that the inconveniences you feel you cannot avoid; whereas, if they feel any, it is their own fault. But, in truth, there are disquiets, belonging to their rank, from which yours is exempt. Or allowing it to be their own fault, what follows? Why, that your sufferings proceeding from God's providence, if you behave well under them, you will be rewarded for them; and theirs, proceeding from their own wrong conduct, without repentance they will be punished for them over and above. And who can tell, but were you in the same situation, you might fall into the same faults? Power and rank, and leisure and plenty, may indeed be used to excellent purposes; but prove commonly, in fact, such strong temptations to the worst of sins, that a station less exposed to danger, and which obliges you in several respects to behave only as all persons ought to behave, may be the greatest worldly blessing

F f

sing

sing you could have had ; even though it were accompanied with much more grievous outward disadvantages than it is. But indeed some of those disadvantages consist in mere opinion and fancy. You are miserable, because you think yourself poor ; at the same time there are those, who, if they were but in your condition, would be happy, for they would think themselves rich. And the very persons, whom you envy, because they are above you, it may be are pitying themselves all the while, because others are above them. This, you see, is only fancy and folly on both sides.

But as to more real inconveniences. Just in the same manner that custom makes a life of pleasure insipid to the great, it makes a life of labour and hardship tolerable and comfortable to their inferiors ; unless they set their own minds to make it otherwise. Indeed, when persons are reduced, from ease and affluence, to take pains and feel straits ; this is a burden much heavier. But even then, reason and time, and especially religion, will teach you to support it very well. If it proceed from your own fault, you have little cause to repine, and an useful admonition to learn more wisdom. If from God's disposal of things, his justice and goodness will, sooner or later, amply recompence you for it ; and all his servants will have compassion on you, and help you, in the mean while. The exhortation therefore is very reasonable : *Fear not, my son, that we are made poor ; for thou hast much wealth, if thou fear God, and depart from all sin, and do that which is pleasing in his sight* *. *Whatever is brought upon thee take cheerfully, and be patient, when thou art changed to a low estate* †. But such as are born to that estate, may, for the most part, be very happy in it, if they will. And so many of them are visibly full as happy as the rest of the world ; that if others are unhappy, the defect must lie in their temper, not their circumstances. When indeed any uncommon difficulties befall them : when they have numerous families, and perhaps little employment ; or when old age disables them from working ; or sickness calls for relief, which they have not the means of procuring ; then their case is very grievous ; and all, who know it, should be tenderly affected, and assist them plentifully. But even at such times of distress, they should recollect, that their superiors

* Tob. iv. 21,

† Ecclus. ii. 4.

superiors are by no means intirely free from the same uneasinesses. Persons of considerable rank often find it hard enough to bring up and provide for a number of children decently; and when infirmities and diseases attack the wealthiest, though they may have better advice and accommodations than others, yet these things are not able to lighten the burthen near so much as they that want them imagine. And whoever hath health, which the common people, that live regularly, have the most of, and a good conscience, which all may have that will, seldom needs to be miserable on account of his circumstances. *Health, saith the wise son of Sirach, is above all gold: and a strong body above infinite wealth. There is no riches above a sound body: and no joy above the joy of the heart* *.

These comforts therefore you should value as they deserve: you should reflect also, that of every natural gratification, which God hath provided for man, (and all the artificial ones are trifling in comparison) he hath provided you a good share. You can behold the light of the sun, breathe the freshness of the air, enjoy the beauties of the seasons, relish your food, and be refreshed by your sleep, as well as the greatest monarchs on earth. The higher and social pleasures too, of kind affections, real friendships, frank and chearful conversations, are as much within your reach, as they can be within any one's, if not more. And if your rank be not an honourable, it is however a necessary one: and proper care, to do the business of it skilfully and diligently, will and must, and you cannot but be sensible does, make you regarded and sought after by your betters. On the whole, therefore, even the poor have sufficient cause, not only to be content, but thankful to heaven for its goodness to them.

Still the straits and hardships of some of them, though God's help makes the worst supportable, may leave them small reason to be fond of life. But so may the pains and sorrows of the wealthiest. And even this situation affords you one advantage, that you will have less inducement to regret the approach of death; may detach your affections without reluctance from a world, the enjoyments of which are sadly embittered to others by the thoughts of leaving it; and comfort yourselves with the prospect of going to that place, *where the weary be*

at rest, and the servant is free from his master *. *O Death, how bitter is the remembrance of thee to a man that liveth at rest in his possessions, that hath prosperity in all things! But acceptable is thy sentence to the needy, and to him that is vexed with all things* †. Yet were deliverance from present evils by future endless insensibility the thing hoped for, this would be a melancholy relief. But religion sets before us an infinitely brighter view of things: assuring us, that *God hath chosen the poor of this world, rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom, which he hath promised to them that love him* ‡. Here then is the strong consolation, that on however bad a footing any may be, in their temporal concerns, we are all on a level as to our eternal interests: or, if there be any difference, it is in favour of the suffering part of mankind. *Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted* §.

But, admitting that there is by no means any ground to complain of God, the poor will alledge however, that they have reason frequently to complain of their fellow-creatures, the rich and great, for shewing so little regard to them in their necessities. And far from denying this, it is our duty, who are ministers of the gospel, to plead it for them, and excite others to abound more and more in tender compassion and liberality towards them.

But then, whilst we endeavour, on all occasions, that due care may be taken of you who are poor; we must remind you, not to be insensible of what is done, nor to require more than is reasonable. And here, in the first place, all the common people of this nation ought to esteem it an unspeakable blessing, that they live in a land of laws and liberty; where the meanest is protected from the oppression of the greatest, to a degree that would be incredible in most countries. For too many countries there are, in which your small properties, your whole disposal of yourselves, and your very lives, would be subject to the will of arbitrary masters: and you would neither dare to speak a free word, nor even to worship your Maker in the way that your consciences direct you. Surely then your condition requires of you great thankfulness, not only to God, but to your earthly superiors, who allow and preserve to you such

* Job iii. 17, 19.

‡ James ii. 5.

† Ecclus. xli. 1, 2.

§ Matth. v. 4.

such valuable privileges ; and great respect, in your manner, both of behaving towards them, and thinking of them : which is very ill shewn by murmuring against them for things that you cannot be judges of, and in all likelihood are utterly misinformed about.

But farther : the lowest part of the poor, in particular, should consider, what ample provision for their wants is made here by law ; such as no other nation upon earth hath established : what noble foundations, for their relief under sickness or accidents, and for the education of their children, private charity hath laid : and these things should dispose them to a better opinion, both of the comforts of their own condition, and of the goodness of those to whom they are owing. If still you are any of you in distress, recollect whether your own mismanagement hath not been the principal occasion of it ; and lay the blame, which you ought, upon yourselves, before you lay any upon others. However, even in this case you are to be relieved ; but not so liberally as if you had deserved better. Consider too, whether even now you are not able to get or to save more than you do : and remember that no one is bound to give you, what your own diligence and frugality would supply you with, if you pleased. But supposing your want, and your merit, as great as possible ; it is not every one, to whom you apply, that can do for you what you imagine. Undoubtedly the rich are often hard-hearted ; but perhaps the poor are, full as often, immoderate in their expectations, and unjust in their censures. You do not know what sums people are able to give in charity : for, in all likelihood, you are neither well acquainted with their incomes, nor the various demands that there are upon them of other sorts : which last may easily be greater than you can well apprehend. Besides, you do not know what they do give in charity. That which they refuse to you, or your acquaintance, they may bestow, and perhaps much more, on others, who possibly are full as proper objects, whatever you may think. And I doubt not, but many a good man is frequently cursed, for denying a trifle to a clamorous publick petitioner, who hath been largely and willingly bountiful to private distresses, perhaps but the hour before ; and it may be, doth more service by his prudent choice, than his liberal distribution. We ought not indeed to pass over any of the poor, from partiality or penuriousness, but give

to every one that asketh *, so far as our circumstances permit us, and the end of giving, will be served by it. But as giving to some would do harm, and we cannot give to all enough to do them good, charity itself forbids us to interpret this precept in the fulness of its literal extent. Yet God forbid that any should seek a pretext for relieving few or none, because many are undeserving, and they cannot relieve every one. Such a plea will not excuse them in the opinion of men here ; much less in that awful judgment hereafter, when the *rich and the poor shall meet together* before the Lord, the Maker of them all †. But as the wealthy should not contrive to evade almsgiving, so the needy should not be forward to suspect them of it ; but resolve to *judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who will make manifest the counsels of the heart* ‡.

One thing more, to be observed by you in favour of your condition, is, that God hath not left you to depend solely on the piety and charity of the rich ; but provided, that their love of gain, their vanity, or their luxury, shall be made what they do not design them for, the means of doing some good to their inferiors, by employing them ; as well as much harm, by setting them an ill example. More good might be done indeed, and all the harm avoided, would they act from the principles they ought. For the follies and vices of one part of mankind, are far from being the proper method of maintaining the other. But however, it is a remarkable instance of the kindness of Providence, to have ordered things so, that they who mean you little or no service, shall do you a great deal : and contribute, without thinking of it, to make your condition comfortable, while perhaps they are making themselves wretched, both in this life and that which is to come.

Upon the whole then it appears, that you have no ground of complaint against God ; and much less, perhaps than you imagined, against men ; that your state hath many comforts belonging to it ; and usually not many necessary sufferings, beyond what others feel. But when any of you have the most, only do your duty faithfully and prudently, and you may compose your minds, with a full assurance, that at length all shall end well : *Your light afflictions, which are but for a moment, shall work for you an eternal weight of glory* § in the

next

* Luke vi. 30.

† 1 Cor. iv. 5.

‡ Prov. xvii. 2.

§ 2 Cor. iv. 17.

next world: and in this, as God hath enabled you to bear them hitherto, he will doubtless enable you to bear them still; nay, perhaps lighten your burthen when you least think of it. *For the poor shall not alway be forgotten: the patient abiding of the meek shall not perish for ever* *. *The eye of the Lord is upon them that fear him, on them that put their trust in his mercy; to deliver their soul from death, and keep them alive in the time of famine* †. *Trust in the Lord, and do good: so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed* ‡. Some means or other heaven will point out to you, to prevent your falling into the utmost extremities. Providence is your security: the greatest persons on earth have no better. Without a title to God's favour, no one can be happy: and with it, no one needs be miserable. *For whether a man be rich or poor, if he have a good heart towards the Lord, he shall at all times rejoice, with a chearful countenance* §.

* Ps. ix. 18.

† Ps. xxxvii. 3.

‡ Ps. xxxiii. 18, 19.

§ Eccclus. xxvi. 4.

S E R M O N X X I.

THE DUTIES OF THE POOR.

MATTH xi. 5.

And the poor have the gospel preached to them.

ONE principal mark of true religion is its tendency to make men first good, then happy. Precepts of piety and virtue, unattended with rewards, will always be ineffectual : and promises of rewards, independent upon piety and virtue, must of necessity be false. Christianity therefore comprehends both, and proposes them equally to all mankind : requiring obedience from the greatest, as a condition of God's favour ; and offering eternal felicity to the meanest, on performance of their duties. For this reason I have lately set before you the peculiar duties of the upper part of the world, and have since proceeded to those of the lower. The only one of the latter, which I have hitherto mentioned, is, that they be content with their condition ; and neither murmur at all against God, who never gives them cause ; nor complain of men more than they have cause ; nor be dejected in their own minds ; but compose and support themselves, by attending to the comforts of the state they are in, as well as the inconveniences of it. With this I chose to begin, and to insist on it largely, because, when once the poor are convinced that they may be happy, they will naturally and cheerfully endeavour to become so : for which end they must learn,

2. To be humble : a virtue closely connected with the former. For as pride is usually the origin of discontent, so discontent in return nourishes pride ; till, after thinking falsely their present situation too bad for them, men come by degrees to think hardly any sufficiently good. Now all may find great reason for humility, on viewing the imperfections and frailties of

of human nature in general, and their own in particular: but the poor have additional subjects of mortification to reflect on; they see and feel themselves inferior to most around them, dependent probably on some for their livelihood; and are excluded from the possibility of many improvements and advantages which others enjoy, still this is no ground for dissatisfaction. For that some are in a better condition cannot really change theirs into a worse. It remains, notwithstanding, just what it would be, if none were better. And making comparisons only to disquiet yourselves, is great folly. But making them, to learn from that inferiority in which you are placed, a suitable way of thinking and behaving, is so needful and so obvious a lesson both of wisdom and duty, that neglecting it is inexcusable.

Those minds must be grievously hardened in the wrong, that can have no impression made on them by such peculiarly strong calls to be modest and submissive. Nor will this prove a less unhappy disposition, than it is a faulty one: but, in all likelihood, you will suffer more from the absurd haughtiness of your temper, than all the hardships of your outward circumstances put together. Instead of esteeming or pitying you, the world will dislike and scorn you. For the son of *Sirach* expresses only what every one in some measure feels, when having said, *three sorts of men my soul hateth, and I am greatly offended at their life*; he puts down, in the first place, *a poor man that is proud* *. Pride in those, who should be the farthest from it, is extremely disgusting, even when it is harmless: but usually it leads on to insolent behaviour. Now insolence to superiors may produce unspeakable mischiefs to you; but will always produce some: and though it be confined to your equals or inferiors, will be the source of perpetual uneasiness, as well as guilt. Yet I am afraid it is exceeding common for the lower ranks to use those who are but a little beneath them, with such contempt and harshness as they seldom or never experience from the highest above them; and would not think it tolerable, if they did. But surely then you should be willing to give the treatment, you expect to receive: and seeing, as you must, how well condescension becomes your betters; think how ill, assuming and over-bearing becomes you. But supposing your

VOL. I.

G g

haughtiness

* Eccles. xxv. 2.

haughtiness injurious or displeasing to no one else, it will be greatly detrimental to yourself. You have formerly been in good circumstances perhaps, or you are descended from a good family: and therefore you will not bring down your heart to your present condition. But what follows from this? Only that struggling under the yoke makes it gall you the more; and you are ten times uneasier, than you need to be: whereas would you but accommodate your spirit to your station; you would soon be sensible, that with men as well as God, *he that humbleth himself shall be exalted*†: You would enjoy, in this world, a peaceful composure of soul; and in the next, that blessedness, which is reserved for the meek and lowly.

But of all sorts of pride in the poor, the strangest and most pernicious is that, which tempts not a few of them to imagine, they are of too much consequence to do any thing for their own maintenance. Indeed when they have formerly been of good rank and lived in plenty, especially when their fall from it is not owing to wilful sins or follies, it should be the endeavour of their relations and friends to provide for them, in some degree suitably to what they once were. But if such as are especially concerned, either cannot or will not do this, there is little room to expect, that others should contribute enough towards it to be effectual. And therefore the unhappy persons whose case it is, unless providence raise them up some unlooked-for support, sink down of course to the level of the common poor: and it cannot be more the duty of the charitable to help them, than it is theirs to help themselves by any sort of honest employment, for which they are qualified. Once heaven had placed you in a higher sphere; now it hath reduced you to a lower: the occupations of the latter are as much incumbent upon you at present, as those of the former were before: and your attention to them will be as amply rewarded by the disposer of all things. You must support yourself, either by virtuous diligence, or by vicious courses. The latter, nothing can justify: the former, in whatever way you are called to exercise it, will be no reproach, but an honour to you. And the rich and great, far from rejecting and disowning their poor kindred or acquaintance, for condescending to any useful business, when necessity requires, ought to encourage and applaud them. For
it

* Matth. xxiii. 12.

it is an excellent mark of a right and good mind, that they rather chuse to *work with quietness, and eat their own bread**, than importune others, or lead themselves into temptation. And indeed the temptations, arising from poverty and distress, are so very dangerous to those who have lived in affluence and credit; that as soon as ever they find difficulties coming upon them, (if they have any regard to a good conscience) they must immediately reduce their own expences, lower the appearance and expectations of those who depend on them, and so conduct every thing, as may least expose them to the hazard of acting amiss, and best secure them an honest subsistence. For, whatever a false honour may suggest to the contrary, *better is he that laboureth, and aboundeth in all things, than he that boasteth himself and wanteth bread*†. The mention of this matter hath led me insensibly to a

3d Duty of the poor, and a very important one, that of industry; to which humility will greatly incline them, nor will contentment be at all inconsistent with it. For a principal reason why the poor may be justly contented, is, that by diligence they may go on very comfortably; and their being well enough satisfied with their present situation is no manner of objection against endeavouring to better it, when opportunity offers. Every one indeed is bound to be industrious, in a way suitable to his rank, and contribute his proportion to the common good, in which he shares. Those of high degree are able to do much good singly; the poor have each of them very little separate power: but, considered as a collective body, it is on their application and labour that the wealth and strength of nations, all the conveniences and elegancies of life, indeed the peace and good order of societies depend; for nothing but right employment will keep them out of wrong. These considerations make their diligence of infinite importance to the public; and there are others, besides their interest in the public, that make it of equal importance to themselves. It is true, in point of conscience, the rich are no less obliged to it than you; but in point of worldly necessity, the difference is very wide. Nor yet is it any disadvantage to you on the whole, that in this particular you cannot well avoid acting as you ought. For to how many of your superiors is it the greatest unhappiness, that their circumstances enable them to lead the lives they do!

G g 2

But

* 2 Thess. iii. 12.

† Eccclus. x. 27.

But, in your situation, indulging idleness and its companions can last but a very short time; and then will bring after it such dreadful consequences, of distress and reproach, and temptation to every thing bad, (extending not only to you, but to all who belong to you) that you must resolve to follow some honest employment closely. Be it ever so much against your liking at first, you will certainly come in time to be very well pleased with it. Every one, that hath persevered, hath found it so. And then, you will spend the rest of your days in satisfaction and comfort; you will be at peace within, and respected both by your equals and your betters: if you have children, you will look upon them with delight, and they upon you with gratitude: you will make a provision against sickness and accidents; and when you come to old age, you will be able to afford yourself the rest and quiet you want, because you were willing to take pains before: whereas they, who make ease and pleasure the business of their early years, will find shame and sorrow the portion of the remainder. They wickedly neglect the appointed way of supporting themselves; and such as do, will commonly have bitter experience of what it is to crave support from the bounty of others. *The life of him, that dependeth on another man's table, saith the son of Sirach, is not to be counted for a life—Begging is sweet in the mouth of the shameful, but in his belly there shall burn a fire* *. Sayings of this nature are not in the least designed against persons, whom providence hath rendered incapable of supplying their own necessities. They have nothing to be ashamed of, but ought to be assisted with tenderness and respect. God hath sent them to us to receive at our hands what is their due; and who so mocketh such poor, Solomon hath declared, *reproacheth their Maker* †. But those who would not be industrious when they could, deserve but little relief afterwards; unless deep repentance intitle them to a better share; and they that will not now when they can, deserve none at all. It was St. Paul's repeated command to the *Thessalonians*, *that if any one would not work, neither should he eat* ‡. And we should all observe this command, both in the disposal of our own charity, and of any other with which we are intrusted, either by private benefactors, or by the laws of the land. Overseers of the poor are intrusted by the latter; intrusted

* Ecclus. xl. 29, 30.

† Prov. xvii. 5.

‡ 2 Thess. iii. 10.

intrusted to act with humanity and compassion indeed, but with prudence and frugality at the same time. All therefore who in their turns come to serve that office, I hope consider very seriously, that the poor, who are fit for employment, ought, as far as possible, to find it for themselves, or have it found for them; and that when either of these things can at all be done, maintaining them in idleness is only teaching them to be useless and wicked. Indeed the poor themselves should consider, that contriving to live upon alms, when they are able, wholly or in part, to live upon the produce of their own labour, is injuring the community, by doing nothing to promote its welfare; injuring all who contribute to their support, by laying a needless burthen upon them; injuring the rest of the poor, by keeping from them what else they would receive in greater plenty. For no one can bestow so much on proper objects, who is misled to bestow on improper ones too. And the frequency of such impositions makes many unwilling to give what else they would; and furnishes others with a specious pretence for withholding what else, with any decency, they could not. Therefore industry, besides its being an indispensable duty of the poor, in itself, is necessary to their practising a further duty, to which I proceed in the

4th Place; that is, honesty. For to beg, instead of working, is one sort of dishonesty. To undertake any work for another, and not do it diligently, is a second sort; often a very provoking, sometimes a very mischievous one. Yet there is a third still grosser, to which idleness tempts them but too powerfully, mentioned in *Agur's* wife prayer, *lest I be poor and steal**. Now stealth, open or secret, how commonly soever it be committed, is much too plainly a sin to be in general defended; and therefore I need not prove to you the unlawfulness of it. But there are two cases notwithstanding, in which some of the poor seem to think it scarce any fault at all: when either a very small matter is taken away, or it is from a very rich person, which makes it small to him. But every one hath the same right to the least part of his property that he hath to the greatest. And let any one be ever so wealthy, his wealth is his own; and though unquestionably he ought to give of it to the poor, yet they have no manner of authority to take it without his

* Prov. xxx. 9.

his consent. If they had, it is easy to see into what universal confusion the exercise of that authority would bring the world. But farther:—small misdemeanors of this kind occasion great disquiet; men apprehend themselves unsafe in all about them; know not whom to trust; and the innocent are often suspected and sufferers, for what the guilty thus do. Besides, almost all offenders begin with little faults; and from these they venture gradually on, to worse and worse, till they come to make no scruple of the most capital crimes, and perhaps fall under the sentence due to them. Always remember therefore to beware even of small sins; and carefully observe one rule more, that when any thing is committed to your trust, being dishonest in that, and disposing of any part of it in a manner, which you know you ought not, and are not allowed, is one of the basest kinds of stealing. Wastefulness also, and even mere negligence, approach to the same sin; for by both you injuriously diminish what is not your own. But the most active cause of dishonesty in the poor is, that finding a great deal of time and pains requisite to get but a small matter, they are strongly tempted to shorten their trouble by unfair methods. And possibly you may thus gain some advantages for a while; but very possibly also you may fail, and be discovered and punished even for your first attempt; or if not, every new attempt will expose you anew to the same danger; and it is not one in great numbers that escapes long. Besides, the continual consciousness of your guilt, and fear of being found out, and hated and scorned ever after, will be a continual torment to you; nay, if you are only suspected, and cannot fully confute the suspicion, which a guilty person can never do, this alone, in all probability, may be enough to ruin you. For the livelihood of the poor depends almost intirely on their character, and their character chiefly consists in their honesty. That will make amends for considerable defects in other points, but nothing will make amends for want of that. Or could you escape every evil that you justly fear through this whole life, yet remember another is to follow it very soon, in which you must account for all your deeds. And he who hath commanded, that *no man defraud or go beyond his brother in any matter*, hath declared at the same time, that *the Lord is the avenger of all such* *.

A

* 1 Thess. iv. 6.

A further virtue, which the poor are greatly concerned to practise, much more carefully than many of them do, is that of speaking truth. But this is so near akin to behaving honestly, the reasons for both are so much the same, and they that do nothing amiss have so little temptation to say any thing false, that I shall pass it over at present. The

5th Duty therefore of the poor, which I shall insist on, is that of frugality; without which your honesty will never be secure, and the fruits of your industry will be very foolishly thrown away. Indeed to deny yourselves what you can well afford, and really want, would be cruel and unnatural: suffering the worst inconveniences of poverty without need. But to make your strait circumstances yet straiter, for the sake of idle gratifications, and distress yourselves in necessities, only to indulge in trifles and vanities, delicate food, shewish dress, ensnaring diversions, is every way wrong. You will be hankering after more and more pleasures and amusements, till they quite beggar you: your superiors all the while, whom you affect to imitate, will despise you; your equals will hate and censure you; and your children, for whom at this rate you will provide nothing but a bad example, will have cause, I had almost said, to curse you: whereas, by avoiding unnecessary expences, you will preserve the fruits of your labour entire; be able to make good use of advantages; to stand your ground under losses and disappointments, for they must be expected; to lay up for yourselves, if you prove to have occasion; if not, for those that come after you: nay, to give alms out of your little, and exchange it for treasures in heaven. Saving is very different from being covetous; it is the surest foundation for being bountiful. And even the poor should extend bounty to any that are still poorer, whenever they can really spare it. Nature and reason call upon them to do so; agreeably to which the apostle requires men to *work with their own hands, that they may have to give to him that needeth* *. And as our Saviour hath taught us †, that our charity shall be estimated in proportion to our abilities, the lowest have as much encouragement as the highest to do, even in this way, all the good they can. A

6th Virtue, closely connected with frugality, is sobriety. One should think, that they who find themselves perpetually
in

* Eph. iv. 28.

† Mark xii. 42.

in straits could have little temptation to be guilty of excesses. But uneasiness at their condition drives some, a false notion of recruiting their spirits invites others, and unmeaning custom seduces yet more, into that destructive vice of drinking; which, after soothing you perhaps with a short lived gaiety and forgetfulness of sorrow, will greatly augment the dejection of your minds, as well as the difficulties of your affairs; and thus force you almost to a repetition of the same remedy, which will be followed of course by an increase of the same evils, till your fortunes and healths are both completely ruined. Your morals too, for the most part, by indulgence in this one respect, will be gradually corrupted in every other, even if you do escape those desperate sallies of wickedness which prove more speedily fatal. Your families at the same time, if you have any, will be abandoned to wretchedness; your children perhaps murdered in their infancy, by giving them the same liquors with which you are more leisurely destroying yourselves; or if they do survive, are pretty sure to inherit, from such parents, nothing but bad habits of body and mind. If therefore you have any sense, either of prudence or humanity, you will surely avoid this treacherous sin; which pernicious arts, and mistaken policy, have placed but too much within the reach of the lowest of the poor: or if you have fallen into it, you will renounce it instantly, and resolutely bear the uneasiness which abstaining from it may give you for a while, (for you will certainly overcome it by perseverance) rather than plunge forwards to your utter undoing here and hereafter. A

7th Duty of the poor, which must be mentioned, is that of chastity: a duty, indeed, of all persons, but so far peculiarly incumbent on them, as the transgression of it brings them to more immediate ruin. In one sex it is followed by total loss of honest employment and reputation; by contempt and scorn, even from the men that have seduced them; by grievous temptations to destroy the fruits of their criminal pleasures, and to become abandoned to common prostitution, and with it to every sin, the consequence of which will be every misery of human life. In the other sex it is almost always accompanied with breach of solemn promises; with shocking hardness of heart, where the utmost affection hath been professed; with heavy expences, that often lead to the grossest dishonesty. And both sexes, in common, it exposes to loathsome and fatal diseases, and to a dreadful sentence of future condemnation: for

they

they, which do such things, the scripture hath declared, *shall not inherit the kingdom of God* *. Beware then of a sin so peculiarly dangerous; and for that purpose beware of every indiscretion that may intice you to it. I now proceed, in the

8th Place, to another duty of the poor, which one should think might sufficiently recommend itself, good temper amongst each other. This is necessary in every rank, in order to have any real enjoyment of life; but the more necessary in yours, as you have the fewer enjoyments of other sorts. If you receive harsh treatment from those above you, that perhaps you cannot help; but there is no manner of need of your giving it amongst yourselves. You have felt probably what bitter things injurious language and insolent behaviour are; why then will you make use of them? You know by experience the need of tenderness and pity, why will you not shew it to those who have equal need? You and they are fellow-sufferers in the world; surely that should unite you in mutual kindness, not provoke you to increase your evils, by being hard upon one another. And yet, I fear, some of the greatest hardships, both in word and deed, which the lower part of mankind undergo, proceed from persons who are of low rank themselves. And how far they are capable of carrying such outrages, and how sad the effects of them are, *Solomon* hath expressed by a very strong comparison: *A poor man that oppresseth the poor, is like a sweeping rain, which leaveth no food* †. I have only a

9th And last duty to recommend, but one peculiarly implied in preaching the gospel to you, a serious and deep reverence for religion. Religion is intended, not only for the direction, but the comfort of all degrees of men; and all have need enough of it, but you the most by far. Others have honours, or pleasures, or wealth, elegant amusements or curious inquiries to engage their thoughts; and find some kind of satisfaction in these things, such as it is, and so long as it lasts. But you have nothing, that even seems considerable, to sweeten this world to you, but the expectation of a better. And well may it be for you, that you are reduced to that, as your only choice, which beyond comparison would be your best, if you had ever such plenty. Seek your consolation therefore in what is abundantly capable of giving it you; make the precepts of the gospel your business, and its promises your joy. Christianity is

H h

peculiarly

* Gal. v. 21.

† Prov. xxviii. 3.

peculiarly formed for your benefit. Its laws are your charter, by which you claim a right to pity and love from your superiors, as members of the same body; and we, its ministers, are your advocates to plead your cause with them; authorized to offer them eternal happiness, for being kind to you; to denounce condemnation against them; if they use you, in any one respect, cruelly; and to assure you, at the same time, that the worst treatment they can give you shall turn to your good.

Think then how justly St. *James* hath declared *the poor in this world rich in faith* *; and let the rich and great, if they will, be profane and vicious, and take the consequences: but *let no man beguile you of your reward* †, either by corrupting your principles, or misleading your practice. Religion hath graciously provided for you the repose and comfort of this sacred day, which else you had never known. Make it not a time of acting contrary to religion, but steadily use the opportunities it gives you, of learning and being reminded of your several duties, which you must be sensible you need; of having the honour to join on equal terms with the highest of your fellow-creatures, in presenting petitions and praises to God in his house, and feeding at his holy table. The remainder of your sabbath employ, partly in *considering your ways* ‡, and improving your hearts, by reading, meditation, and prayer in private: partly in a cheerful, but harmless and prudent, social enjoyment of the leisure which heaven hath allowed you. When the days of labour return, recommend yourselves every morning to the blessing of the Almighty, return him thanks every night for his protection, and offer up to him, in your hearts, the work of each day, as done in obedience to his will, and in hopes of his reward: for these things you will find a support and refreshment beyond all belief. In your whole communication learn both to avoid and abhor that monstrous custom of oaths and curses, which are intermixed continually in the common discourse of too many of the poor; with great irreverence towards God, who hath expressly forbidden them; to the great horror and grief of all good persons; with great danger of running into frequent perjuries, and all manner of profaneness; and without any pretence of profit or pleasure, to make the least amends for so much sin. I cannot, and need not, go through the other obligations of religion at present.

Your

* James ii. 5.

† Col. ii. 18.

‡ Hag. i. 5, 7.

Your attendance here, your bibles and other good books at home, will sufficiently inform you of the nature and importance of them; and I beg you not to imagine, that because you are each of you singly of little consequence in the world, God will take little notice of your conduct; but think and act like the psalmist, *I am small, and of no reputation, yet do I not forget thy commandments* *. There is nothing beneath God's attention, any more than above it. The meanest things on earth were made and are continually preserved and inspected by him. But indeed the most considerable thing on earth is the behaviour of his rational creatures; and whether that be right or wrong is of infinite moment in his sight; but whether they be high or low, of none at all. *He regardeth not the rich more than the poor, for they are all the work of his hands* †, and shall all account to him for their deeds. Our blessed Redeemer preached the gospel to the poor, at least as much as to the rich; he laid down his life equally for both; the Holy Spirit offers equally to both the sanctifying influences of his grace; the souls of both are equally capable of, and will equally be conigned to, everlasting happiness or misery. *I saw, saith St. John, a throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heavens fled away, and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God: and the books were opened, and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works* ‡.

This awful scene first imprint strongly on your own minds; then on all you can, especially on those who belong to you. You have little else to give them, but if you give them effectually a practical sense of their duty to God and man, it is an inheritance beyond all treasures. You must see how wicked, and how miserable by their wickedness, multitudes of your own rank are: suffer it not to be the case of those who are dearest to you; but use the little spare time you have (for you will always have some), and the little ability you possess (for God will assist you), to instil into their hearts such early principles of piety and virtue, as may afford you just hopes of their being good and happy by your means in this world, and then following you, to increase your blessedness in the next.

H h 2

SER-

* Psal. cxix. 141.

† Job xxxiv. 19.

‡ Rev. xx. 11, 12.

S E R M O N XXII.

THE DUTIES OF THE SICK.

ISAIAH xxxviii. 1, 2.

In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death: and Isaiah the prophet, the Son of Amos, came unto him, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live. Then Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall, and prayed unto the Lord.

THESE words present to our view a person of the highest rank, in the prime of life, and the full tide of prosperity, seized with a mortal disease: a case, which ought strongly to remind the securest of us all, how uncertain our condition is here on earth. By the goodness of God, a prophet was sent to him, to admonish him of the preparation, that his state required: and the same goodness hath provided, that you shall all be frequently admonished of the same thing, by the ministers of his word. The admonition, given him, was the means of prolonging his days in peace and comfort: and those given you, if received in a right manner, may, both naturally and providentially, contribute to procure you longer and happier lives in this world; and will certainly lead you to a life of eternal happiness in the next.

The denunciation made to *Hezekiah*, however awful, is, by virtue of the original sentence of God, equally true of every man, *Thou shalt die, and not live.* The healthiest of us is sick of an incurable distemper: whether it shall last a few years, or a few days only, before it carries us off, is all the doubt: and the difference is much less than we are apt to think it. Would we but consider, how quick the time is gone, which we have lived over, and are dead to, already; to how small a
matter

matter the remainder, which will flee away just as fast, can at most amount; and how much short of that we may fall, and in all likelihood shall, since most men do; we should have little need of monitors concerning mortality. Youth is but the morning, and full strength but the noon of a short day: throughout the whole of which, every refreshment of nature intimates to us its continual decays; every loss of a friend or acquaintance tells us how frail we are ourselves; every sickness calls upon us, with a louder voice, to think of our dissolution; and those disorders, which may seem to whisper it more gently, often bring it on with surprising suddenness. But at least old age gives us, usually the feeling, always the plain sight of its more immediate and unavoidable approach.

Such constant warning of this important and irrevocable change was doubtless intended to produce a constant regard to it: and if we take every way to drive out of our minds what Providence hath taken so many ways to fix in them, it is really *fighting against God**, and that in a point of the utmost concern to us. But then the thought of our latter end is not designed to disquiet and deject us without need or use; but only to engage us in reasoning upon it so justly, and preparing for it so wisely, as that when it comes, (for sooner or later it must) we may meet it with comfort.

It is very true, the best preparation for sickness and death is a good life: and whilst we neglect this, no other can be effectual. But then too many have neglected it: and there is the utmost necessity for them to think, and to be assisted in thinking, of whatever they can do towards retrieving so fatal an error. Nay, with respect to others; as the rules of a good life extend to our behaviour in all circumstances, so there must be some of them peculiarly appropriated to the nearer prospect of our departure hence. And as every thing should be learnt, in the best degree it can, before we want it for practice; and such things especially as are difficult, and yet of moment; so studying in our health the duties of a sick bed; contriving beforehand to make them as few and easy as possible; and forming ourselves to a disposition of going through them as we ought, is no small part of religious wisdom. If you delay till the time of illness comes, (and who can foresee how soon that
may

* Acts v. 39.

may happen? for some things it will be too late; of some you will be ignorant; others you will forget: and those about you too commonly will be unable, or unwilling, or afraid, to remind you of them. They, whose office it is, will scarce have an opportunity given them of attending you: or if they have, will scarce know on the sudden, how to make great use of it. And upon the whole, but little will be done of what should be done.

We all pray, as often as we join in the litany, against *sudden death*. They are undoubtedly the happiest, who have the least occasion to pray against it; but there are few, if any, who have none. And such as profess to desire instead of fearing it, would do well to consider, whether they are so very sure as this implies, that every part, both of their worldly affairs, and of their eternal concerns, is in the best order and condition to which they can bring it: or whether in reality this appearing readiness to die at any time, without warning, be not merely a dread to think of dying at all, as a matter near at hand; unless it be somewhat still worse, disbelief or forgetfulness of what will follow after. But in vain do we petition that our death may not be sudden, if we resolve that it shall: which in effect we do, in proportion as we omit those provisions for the time of its coming, without which it must, in the worst sense, *come upon us unawares**, be its advances ever so slow.

We ought therefore to learn in health what will be incumbent on us in sickness. And since few chuse to teach themselves the precepts which belong to so unpleasing a situation, it remains that all be taught them here: and the lesson is of universal benefit. For in his turn, every one must expect to be in a state of wearisomeness and pain, of weakness and danger: and besides, the particular duties of that state, are, more or less, the general duties of human life: so that whoever is truly considerate and serious, will doubtless be glad to have them laid before him. This therefore I shall endeavour to do, in the method pointed out by the text; which mentions the obligations of sick persons,

I. Respecting their fellow-creatures: *set thine house in order.*

II. Respecting more immediately God and their own souls.

Then Hezekiah prayed unto the Lord.

The

The phrase which expresses the former, *set thine house in order*, may be translated more literally, *Give command concerning*, or, *to thine house*. And this direction may well be enlarged beyond our family strictly so called, by a parity of reason, to comprehend both such regulations of all affairs in which we are interested, and such advice to all persons, with whom we are connected, as appear needful. I shall treat of it therefore in each of these views; but at present only in the first.

Now this includes the general, and, for ought we know, final arrangement of our worldly concerns. As these are frequently either extensive, or intricate, or perfectly understood by none but ourselves; every one ought to be careful, and since they are not, *should often be put in remembrance*, as the office for the sick in so many words appoints, *to take order for settling their temporal estates, while they are in health*. Not many, it may be feared, have reason to be contented, that every thing should lie, at the hour of their death, just as it doth now. Some have spent a great part of their lives in putting their houses out of order, in perplexing and ruining their affairs by extravagance, negligence, or ill management. These have singular need to restore them, without delay, to the best posture they can. And such as may have acted very prudently on the supposition of living long, may yet have done little or nothing in regard to the possibility of dying soon. Now sickness frequently affords but little time; and almost always brings along with it uneasiness full enough for us to bear, without the additional weight of business. Besides, in that condition, our judgment, or memory, or attention may be impaired. Weakness of spirits may subject us to undue impressions from those who are about us: our truest friends and ablest and properest advisers may be accidentally absent, or artfully kept from us: in short, one way or another, there is a great hazard of our doing things wrongly, or at best imperfectly. Fears or suspicions of this may grievously disquiet us, and add to our danger: or, though we apprehend that no evils will arise, from our want of timely caution, to those whom we leave behind us, they may come to feel very dreadful ones. And why should not all this be prevented? We must leave what we have, whether we dispose of it or not. And if we defer disposing of it, because we have not the heart to do it, such a heart should not be indulged, but amended. The difficulty of settling

settling things, or the uncertainty how to settle them, will scarce grow less by putting it off to the last. If any alteration of circumstances, or of our opinion, should happen after our disposition is made, it may be altered accordingly. And that strange imagination of being nearer death, for having completed this or any provision for it, is a poor absurd superstition, confuted by daily experience. On the contrary, you will be more at ease, and likely to live the longer, for having done your duty in this respect. And by making sure to do it in time, you may obviate great injustice, grievous contentions and enmities, long and vast expences, where, if they be not obviated, the fault will lie at your door.

Every one therefore should take the earliest care of these matters. But if any one hath omitted it, the office before-mentioned expressly requires, that he *be admonished* in his sickness *to make his will, and to declare his debts, what he oweth, and what is owing unto him, for the better discharging of his conscience, and the quietness of his executors.* We of the clergy have now but seldom the means allowed us of giving you this or any other admonition at such times. I hope it is not our fault. Consider if it be not yours. But however that be, we may and we ought to do it from the pulpit: where, speaking openly to all in general, we cannot be suspected of any private unfair design, into whatever particulars the subject may lead us.

The principal point, at which men should aim in settling their temporal affairs, is justice: and one of the most evident branches of justice is paying debts. Our first care therefore should be, never to contract debts which we cannot reasonably hope to pay: and our next, to secure the payment of those, which we have contracted, as fully and speedily as we can. Else we shall be in continual danger of injuring, perhaps distressing and undoing, persons and families, only for thinking well enough of us to trust us. It is extremely dishonourable, (I might use a harsher word) at any season of life, to indulge our idleness, gratify our fancies and appetites, or support our rank, at their expence. But when sickness gives us a prospect of never being just to them, unless we are so immediately, we have then every possible motive for labouring most earnestly to indemnify them. And we ought to prefer the demands, which they have upon us, before all mere properties, however reasonable; contrive good security for them out of whatever

we fairly can : and if, after all, we cannot do it effectually, recommend them, as far as ever there is any plea for it, to the compassion of our surviving representatives and relations. But as we cannot be certain that they will, and in several cases there may be no reason why they should, do what we desire : the only sure way is, to provide, before it is too late, for doing it ourselves. If our circumstances are upon the whole sufficient to answer all claims ; barely making known the debts due from us, and owing to us, or at most stating them with the parties concerned, may be enough : and where it is wanted, employing some thought and pains on such matters, as we are able, will be doing very good service both to our creditors and to our heirs.

But besides those who are commonly called creditors, there is another, and much more dreadful sort : I mean those to whom we have done injuries, and owe restitution. Injuries ought never to be done. When they are done, restitution, if it can, ought to be made immediately : and till it is offered so far as our ability extends, we remain both debtors and sinners. If we defer it to the last, we may never make it at all : and though we do, whether God will then accept it, must be doubtful : but if even then we refuse it, unless the cause be that we excusably mistake the nature of the case, we preserve no ground for hope. It is unspeakably better therefore to think seriously at any time than never, what wrongs or what hardships any of our fellow-creatures have suffered from us : and to what suitable compensation they are intitled, either in strict justice, or in equity and good conscience. The answer to this question may often be a very afflicting one : but if men will do amiss, they must take the consequences. It may also, in some cases, be difficult to fix upon the right answer, or to find proper methods of putting it in practice, if we know it : but we must not, on account of difficulties, lay aside the thought of doing our duty ; but ask the best advice, where we are at a loss ; leave directions, to be executed by others, where we have not time ourselves ; and at least make due acknowledgments, unless particular circumstances forbid, where we cannot make amends. Perhaps nothing further than acknowledgments will be expected by those whom we have injured : and then we are bound to nothing further.

But as we have all more or less need to ask pardon, another

of our duties evidently is, to grant it in our turn: when others have used us ill, not to *recompence* or wish them *evil for evil**; not to deny them proper kindnesses; or even think of them worse than they deserve: to accept any submissions that do but approach towards being sufficient; and be reconciled to them, not in words alone, which is adding hypocrisy to resentment, but in reality; affording them as large proofs, both of our favour and confidence, as any good and wise man, uninterested in the matter, would think fitting; seriously wishing their good, in soul, body and estate; and being ready to promote it as far as we properly can. This is the full meaning of being in charity, which we ought to be constantly in with all men: and, if the reason of our professing to be so, is merely that we imagine our end to be near, it will be extremely questionable whether we are so indeed. Yet a late, nay an imperfect reconciliation is always preferable to none, provided there be any sincerity in it. For the expedient, to which, it is said, some have had recourse, of forgiving if they die, and being revenged if they live, is as wicked and as foolish a contrivance to deceive themselves, and to mock God, as the human heart can frame. We may indeed have forgiven, yet not have declared our forgiveness: and it may possibly be prudent, nay kind, in some cases, to suspend that declaration, at least in part, for a while; though seldom, if ever, very long. But at farthest, when death appears to threaten us, it is high time to allow, both ourselves, and all with whom we are concerned, the comfort of seeing our differences, if possible, intirely made up: that we may lie under no imputation at our departure of any thing unmeet for those mansions of peace, that we hope we are going to inhabit. The same office, therefore, which I have already quoted more than once, requires in particular, that the sick person *be exhorted to forgive, from the bottom of his heart, all that have offended him; and if he hath offended any other, to ask them forgiveness; and where he hath done injury or wrong to any man, that he make amends to the uttermost of his power.*

The next thing, after providing for the payment of our debts, and which, like that, should be done in health, but much rather in sickness than not at all, is disposing of the remainder of our substance: a matter comprehending too great
a variety

* Rom. xii. 17.

a variety of cases, to permit any other than general directions from this place. The principal rule is, that we ought not to be governed in it, to any considerable degree, by fanciful fondnesses, much less by blameable resentments: but act on such grounds, as not only we ourselves, but other men of unquestioned prudence and impartiality, think are good ones. For where we seem to be most at liberty, we are still bound to make a rational use of that liberty: and should therefore carefully judge as well as we can; and still be a little dissident, whether we have judged right; not wantonly do whatever we please, and be confident that we cannot do amiss, or regardless whether we do or not. Scarce any reasons ought to exclude our children: whatever limitations and restraints may be sometimes advisable. Nor, in default of children, should any other than very strong reasons exclude those whom nearness of blood points out for our heirs. But then we should be content with allowing as moderate a prerogative to one of our posterity or kindred, above the rest, as our station and rank, the constitution of our country, and the established maxims of society will admit: and not leave all our family besides, or any part of it, in undeserved straits and contempt, for the vanity of raising a single branch higher than we ought.

Another caution, often too requisite, is, that if our heirs be different from our successors in any station or office of which we are possessed; or if they, whom we are inclined to favour, be it ever so justly, are different from our legal heirs; we ought at no time, and yet less, if possible, at our latter end, to do any thing unequitable, or even unhandsome, for the advantage of the former, or to express our dislike of the latter. Mean behaviour will sully our characters, and generous behaviour give a lustre to them, on these occasions beyond most others. For to act right against our own interest, or that of our favourites, is peculiarly honourable: and to act wrong, when we are just going to account for our actions, is peculiarly shocking.

Other things yet, (sometimes duties, and almost always proprieties) belonging to this part of the subject, are, gifts to worthy and useful friends, answerable to the intimacy in which we have lived with them, and to their occasions for such kindness: also recompences to domestics in proportion to their services, compared with the exigency of their circumstances. But

however we may be at liberty in relation to some of these points, we are strictly bound to the observation of another rule, with respect to all who are about us in our sickness; of a different nature indeed from the preceding ones, but which it is much better to mention here than to omit; that we shew them peculiarly at that time great humanity and goodness: not requiring from them more fatiguing or constant attendance than is fit; nor more care, skill and dexterity, than is to be expected: recollecting, that our illness inclines us to imagine things amiss, in a degree beyond reality; and that others ought not to suffer merely because we do: thinking often how disagreeable an office they go through, and what benefit and comfort we receive from it: begging them to forgive us those hasty fallies of fretfulness and impatience that sometimes will escape us; and making them good amends in every way that we can, for all the trouble which they take about us.

Another article, usually considered along with some, of which I have just been speaking, is the manner of our funeral. And it may sometimes be very proper to direct this ourselves, in order to keep our friends from the imprudence of a too expensive, or the imputation of a too frugal one. Now we shall undoubtedly give a proof, both of humility and good sense, by avoiding, (unless motives of a public nature demand it) all appearance of ostentation, at a time that shews the vanity of worldly pomp in so strong a light; and appointing that only such regard be paid to our dead body, as may express our faith of its rising again; together with so much deference to custom, as may preserve us from the charge of a singularity affected without reason. Nor let it be thought, that religion hath nothing to do with several of these matters, which I have now specified. It hath to do with every matter, where there is a right and a wrong: and *whatsoever things are venerable, whatsoever things are lovely and of good report, you are to think on these things**: and that you may, we are to teach them.

But there is another point, of much greater importance, expressly enjoined in the office for the sick: that the *minister should not omit earnestly to move such as are of ability, to be liberal to the poor*. Our charity indeed ought to shine forth uniformly,

* Phil. iv. 8.

formly, and warm those, who need it, through our whole life: not make a sudden blaze, to dazzle the eyes of others and our own, at the close of it. What we give in our health, we give away from ourselves; and we may know, and the world must presume, that we do it from a willing heart: whereas delaying it to the last hath too much the look of a shallow design to bribe God, and catch the applause of our fellow-creatures, with what we can keep no longer. However, they who have always been charitable, should still go on to the end, exercising the same virtue: which hath great promises made to it from God in sickness. *Blessed is he that considereth the poor: the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble. The Lord will preserve him and keep him alive: The Lord will strengthen him upon the bed of languishing* *. They again, who could not give so much in their lives as they wished, can sometimes very properly give considerably at their deaths; which doubtless God will graciously accept: and they, who have neglected this duty carelessly, or even wilfully, had much better, on conviction, amend late, than never. Therefore all should examine, what is incumbent on them: and supply their deficiencies, if they have been guilty of any. Such as have in no way done much for the poor, in proportion to their circumstances, may be sure they have not done enough. Such as imagine they have done them great good by the expences of their luxury and pride, should think, whether they have not done them, or others, as much or more harm by the same means. And even they, who have done the most real and unmixed good, ought still to remember, that they have only been so far truly charitable, as charity was in truth their inward motive. These considerations may give many cause to increase their beneficence, under the attacks of diseases, or the decline of health. But then they must carefully avoid all vain-glory in it: else our Saviour hath told them, that in *being seen of men they have their whole reward* †: nor do they always obtain even the applause, which they seek. They must likewise guard against all conceit of merit: and look on themselves not as making a present, but as paying a debt to God and their brethren; and that so imperfectly, as to be acquitted of sin only through him, who died to procure acceptance for their best performances. What-
ever

* Psal. xli. 1, 2, 3.

† Matth. vi. 1, 2.

ever is done thus, though it should fail of the intent, yet exercises the true spirit of almsgiving as usefully to us, as if it succeeded. But still we should exercise it with all the prudence we can: else we may tempt the objects of our liberality to idleness or debauchery; and perhaps the present or future managers of it to fraud. Yet the danger of either abuse ought to make us, not less bountiful, but only more circumspect; and as early in our benefactions as possible, that we may bestow or settle them in the properest manner, which is very difficult in a hurry at the last.

And here it may be useful to observe, that besides the common charities, to which the present age, with all its faults, is remarkably well inclined, there are various other ways of doing good. Sometimes a great deal may be done without any expence; as by making public beneficial discoveries: and the possessors of such secrets are bound in conscience not to let them be lost. Sometimes again, what is no particular charity to any certain man, may be a great and extensive benefit to mankind: as foundations for the study, or rewards for the improvement, of arts or sciences. And lastly, what may seem to contribute nothing to the temporal advantage of men, may contribute to it more than any thing: or were it ever so little, may be of unspeakable service to what is of infinitely greater importance, their eternal happiness: as benefactions for the support, and serious and decent exercise, of religion. If religion be a truth, (and conscientious preparation for death plainly confesses it is) providing for the maintenance and honour of it, must be a duty: and many have been so niggardly, so unjust to it, in the days of their health, that they will find they owe it large compensations, if they reflect as they ought, in time of sickness.

But then, the utmost care should be taken to avoid all those errors, by which the improvident donations of former ages have brought so unhappy a disesteem at present on the most rational acts of this part of piety: acts however to be more earnestly recommended, and more liberally performed by such as do acknowledge its value, because such great numbers do not. Only we must never imagine, that the largest alms or oblations can purchase us either a licence or a pardon, (otherwise than as all true marks of repentance contribute towards the latter) for any kind of sin, particularly of injustice. God himself

himself hath said : *I the Lord love judgment : I hate robbery for burnt offering* *. Nor must we rob our own families, more than strangers, of what they are intitled to. But then they are not intitled to all, that we can possibly leave them : but an equitable share of it is due to religious and charitable uses. If indeed we have given a competent proportion before, and know that they, whom we shall leave to represent us, if we die, have the same disposition, that may suffice. For different circumstances require different methods to be taken. And therefore the scripture observes, that *a good man will guide his affairs with discretion* †. But one part of that discretion it hath expressly declared to be *dispensing abroad, and giving to the poor* ‡ : which whoever doth in a right manner, will be likely to obtain a return of God's bounties, to his family, as well as himself ; in their temporal concerns, as well as their spiritual, if that be really best for them. *His seed shall be mighty upon earth : the generation of the faithful shall be blessed. Riches and plenteousness shall be in his house : his righteousness endureth for ever* §.

* Isa. lxi. 8.

† Psal cxii. 5.

‡ Ver. 9.

§ Psal. cxii. 2, 3.

S E R M O N XXIII.

THE DUTIES OF THE SICK.

ISAIAH xxxviii. 1, 2.

In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death: and Isaiah the prophet, the Son of Amos, came unto him, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live. Then Hezekiah turned his face towards the wall, and prayed unto the Lord.

IN discoursing lately on these words, after reminding you of the uncertainty of life and health, and the need of preparing for sickness and death before either of them appears to be at hand, I proposed to assist you in this good work, by laying before you the duties of the sick,

I. Respecting their fellow-creatures.

II. Respecting more immediately God and their own souls.

I. The former, I observed to you, are expressed in the text by the words, *Set thine house in order*, or, translating more literally, *Give command concerning*, or, *to thine house*. And this direction may well be enlarged to comprehend, both due regulations of all affairs in which the sick are interested, and proper advice to all persons with whom they are connected. In the first of these views I have already treated of it.

And proceed now to the next point, that of needful advice to those of our own family, our relations and domestics, with whom may well be joined our friends, and those with whom we have lived in familiarity.

It is a character, which God gives of *Abraham* with marks of great approbation, *I know him, that he will command his children, and his household after him, and they shall keep the way*
of

of the Lord to do justice and judgment *. Undoubtedly both he and the other good patriarchs performed this duty through their whole lives, as we should also; but we find it recorded of several of them, and therefore may presume it of the rest, that they gave more solemn admonitions to their families at their deaths, in which too our imitation of them is highly requisite. For the dying words, and those which probably may be such, of parents and masters to their children and servants, of friends to their friends, and of worthy persons to such as respect them, naturally make an uncommon impression. The occasion is awful; the minds of the hearers are usually tender and affectionate; apt to condemn their former disregards, and to receive what is now said, as carrying in it a peculiar obligation and sacredness: besides that it may often render forsaking bad customs and acting right much the easier to them, if they can say, (what the world will regard more than a better reason) that such was the dying injunction of such a friend.

You will therefore surely improve such an opportunity, as their prospect of being deprived of you, though not a certain one, affords you for this excellent purpose. If you have always, or for a considerable time, led a pious life, you will testify to all about you, that you have found it the sure way to inward peace, and that you feel the faith and love of God a strong support in your present hour of suffering and trial. If you have been remiss and negligent, you will excite them, by speaking of the remorse which it gives you, to more care and zeal. If you have fallen into gross and public sins, you will express to them fully a deep sense of your guilt. For be assured, that taking shame to yourself thus will be true honour, both in the eyes of God and man. Warn others therefore against the rocks on which you have split, and beseech them to learn, by your sad experience, without wanting to add their own. If they are well disposed and good, give them the pleasure of knowing that you rejoice in it; and exhort them to persevere, with tokens of a cheerful confidence that they will. If you discern faults or weak sides in them, or dangers to which they will be liable, caution them, not harshly, but in the kindest and most persuasive manner, to avoid, for your sake as well as their own, what you foresee will else prove hurtful, if not fatal to them: and beg of them, that, if they should

notwithstanding go wrong, the remembrance of your words may at least, when they find they have, prevail on them to retreat in time. If you have neglected instructing them in essential points, acknowledge it to them with sorrow, and be earnest with them to make themselves amends. If you have instilled into them, by discourse or example, any false notions, whether speculative or practical, labour to set them right as completely as you can. But, throughout the whole of your endeavours, exact no promises from them that may be snares; lay no burthen upon them that may prove too heavy; let nothing superstitious, or any way unreasonable, nothing that can be imputed only to the weakness of your condition, enter into the charge that you leave with them. Surely I need not add, (if you have any sense of religion) that you are yet less to enjoin them what may gratify resentment, perpetuate variance, or engage them in transgressing the least of God's laws. For it would be the vilest abuse of a death-bed influence to extort from them, by means of it, assurances which it must be a sin to give, and a still greater to fulfil.

It frequently happens, that when men approach very near to their end, they are ill able to exhort even those, who are about them, distinctly and properly. But therefore you should be always doing it in a sufficient degree, that you may have less need to say much to them at last. And when a threatening sickness comes, you should take occasions of speaking, before it is gone too far; but rather force yourself to say a little, though late, than omit it intirely. And be not in the least afraid that then you may happen to express convictions and good resolutions that will not last, and urge upon others better advice than you shall follow yourselves, if you recover; but consider it as one very weighty reason more for these admonitions, that such a declaration of your sentiments will assist in tying you down to them; and directing their future behaviour will greatly contribute to secure your own. Some indeed are at no time capable of using many words to advantage. But perhaps you can use a few that shall have the effect of many; at least, you can recommend a valuable acquaintance, an instructive awakening book, attendance on public worship, serious recollection from time to time, humble prayer to God in private. If therefore it be possible, fail not to make some advantage of what may prove your last opportunity. Think how dreadful it will be, if your children, your servants, your
friends,

friends, should have ground to say to you in the day of judgment, "Had you in your life taught me any thing but sin, and folly, or trifles; had you at your death warned me of my duty and my danger, my condition might have been intirely the reverse of what now it must be for ever." And, on the contrary, what delight will it bring you, not only to see them happy along with you, but to hear them acknowledge, that you were the cause of it; and to enjoy their gratitude, as part of your reward, to all eternity!

I now proceed to lay before you,

II. The duties of the sick, respecting more immediately God and their own souls; to which our thoughts are naturally turned by the words, *Then Hezekiah prayed unto the Lord*: for every sentiment of piety may be exprest in prayer.

His prayer indeed, if the whole of it be recorded in scripture, was only that he might recover; a request, which for the public good he had urgent reasons to make in the first place. And that being instantly granted, he had no need to apply further to God, in relation to his sickness, otherwise than by thanksgiving, which he did. But they who have more extensive wants at that time, are both authorized and bound to enlarge in proportion the subject of their addresses to the throne of grace; and therefore I shall endeavour to comprehend under this head all the religious duties of the sick.

Great multitudes, in this nation as well as others, have formerly thought, and too many think still, that they can be acceptable to God by acts of devotion, without equitable and kind behaviour to men, or virtuous government of themselves; which persuasion hath produced an absurd, useless, nay, mischievous kind of religion in some, and contempt and even hatred of all religion in others. But amongst us, at present, much the largest number build their hopes of future happiness, if they have any, on their performance, such as it is, of moral obligations; with little or no regard, either in their lives or at their deaths, to dictates of piety, scriptural or natural: at least, beyond a few formalities, negligently practised now and then, just as they please. Indeed very many seem to fancy, that the time of sickness is the unfittest of all others for attending to such subjects; that then persons ought to think as little as possible, and of the most insignificant things they can. Now, if they are but able to keep God out of their minds when they

are ill, it is easy to do it when they are well; and so all goes on as they wish.

But though it be a most fatal mistake to believe, that every thing may be done at our latter end, yet it is also a very pernicious one to apprehend, that nothing can be done when danger of it seems to approach. For that season furnishes most favourable opportunities for such reflections and such behaviour, as will not only produce the happiest effects of all sorts, if we recover, but greatly better our future condition, if we die. And though in some distempers, especially some periods of them, religious meditations, agitating the sick very strongly, would only disorder their minds, and increase the hazard of their lives; yet in others they are unspeakably the surest relief: and where they do give uneasiness, which they are far from doing always, will soon afford, if they are pursued as they ought, most valuable degrees of comfort and peace. On all accounts therefore, he, who hath a right to our continual and most awful attention in every part of life, ought to have it paid him peculiarly in that part, which reminds us of appearing soon before him. Not that it is our duty in the least to imagine distempers worse than they are, to lay stress on idle forebodings, or to despair of life, even when juster grounds of apprehension appear. For *God, who raiseth the dead* *, can raise us from the nearest approach to death, whenever he will. But yet every indisposition is a call from heaven, and some are very loud ones, to think of mortality; and to remember him, who should never be forgot, *our Creator* †, from whom we come, and to whom we shall return.

Now the first principle of all regard to God is faith. And it would be well if many, who are far from suspecting themselves of any tendency towards Atheism, would seriously ask their hearts, what proof they give of having in earnest so much as the faith of natural religion; whether they have considered themselves as under the obligation of paying conscientiously to their Maker the obedience and the worship, which reason requires. But supposing they have; reason shews to sinners, (and we are all such) what they have to do, but in part: and what they have to hope or fear, so very imperfectly, that, however men may persuade themselves to think otherwise in
the

* 2 Cor. i. 9.

† Eccl. xii. 1.

the days of high spirits and presumptuous imaginations ; yet, when sickness brings their future account near to their view, they will find, that nothing could have directed them so rightly through life as God's written law ; and nothing can support them under the terrors of death, like that covenant-right to pardon and eternal happiness, which is there alone offered to mankind ; and even there, on this condition alone, that they trust, not in their own righteousness, not in their own repentance, not in their own endeavours, not in their own amendment, for God's acceptance, but intirely in his mercy through the merits of Jesus Christ ; and so trust in that, as thankfully to yield themselves up to the influences of his blessed Spirit, and in this strength to labour after that universal *holiness* of life and heart, *without which no man shall see the Lord* *. Therefore convince yourself without delay of the truth and importance of this gracious covenant, which, to a thoughtful humble mind will soon be visible ; and if you are convinced, intitle yourself without delay to a share in it, and watchfully preserve this foundation from being at any time undermined ; that in health and prosperity you may stand firm against worldly allurements, and in sickness and adversity against despondence.

There are indeed very good persons, who, in illnesses, particularly of some sorts, are often tempted to partial, or even total unbelief. And if any seeming reasons for it be suggested to their minds, they ought to inquire after, and oppose to them reasonable answers. But where little or nothing lies at the bottom but low-spirited fears that they do not believe at all, or not sufficiently, what their very solicitude, and their whole conduct shews they do ; or difficulties about abstruse points, that need not be cleared up, and perhaps, in this world at least, never will or can : the right way is, to throw them all aside as far as we are able ; to pray to God, that he would free us from anxiety about them in his good time ; to be disturbed the least that is possible for us, if the same scruples and weaknesses, after some interval, return, which they are very apt to do ; and, with the strength that we have remaining, stand by the judgements made in our better days : which, if we have been serious and considerate, are much the likeliest to be true, and being on the side of religion, must be safe ; for we may gain by it infinitely,
but

* Heb. xii. 14.

but lose we cannot. And amongst the doctrines of religion we should not perplex our heads with disputable matters, when we are least of all fit for them, but dwell on such plain acknowledged points, as may best afford us the direction or comfort which we want in our present circumstances.

Being settled thus on the ground-work of faith, our next concern will be to examine the suitableness of our past behaviour to it. Self-examination is a constant duty, but especially requisite when we have the most immediate need to know and amend our condition; besides that possibly it may discover to us some fault of ours, for which the hand of God is laid upon us, and so enable us to obtain the removal of it. An inquiry, which will shew the best of men but too much amiss in them, will doubtless be to most a painful employment; above all, when they have sufferings enough to bear, besides that of a *wounded spirit* *. And why then should we not lighten this burthen beforehand, by avoiding to act wrong, which is the only sure way; or, which is the next, by rectifying it instantly? But whatever we have made necessary, we must support; and being awakened to present remorse, is unspeakably better than going on in a dream to future misery. Directions for making this inquiry must be learnt from the discourses that professedly treat of it. But the chief are these: to compare the whole of our actions, words and thoughts, as well as we are able, with the rule of our duty, conscientiously, and yet coolly; neither accusing ourselves of what we have not done amiss, nor suppressing what we have; neither disturbing our own peace on account of mere infirmities, nor disguising wilful sins under gentle appellations; remembering, that God is merciful and good, yet remembering also, that he is just and holy; reflecting, that we are in his presence: and praying, that he would make us known to ourselves.

After discovering thus how we have been guilty, we must examine also how far we have repented. Now repentance implies disapprobation of what we have done ill, and consequently sorrow for it; without which inward change, an outward alteration of our conduct will avail us nothing. But whether the concern, even of great sinners, be vehement and passionate, or silent and composed, is of small moment, provided it be real
and

* Prov. xviii. 14.

and deep. Sorrow, that we have acted contrary to our interest, is a rational principle; that we have transgressed the rule of morals, is a virtuous one; that we have disobeyed our heavenly Father, is a religious one. And whoever is truly moved by all these considerations, it will be an useless and a hurtful nicety for him to disquiet himself about the proportion in which they are mixed, if together they do but produce the proper effect. And this effect may and will be different in different cases. Our concern for mere frailties, if it make us humble and watchful, will be accepted, though it doth not prevent some relapses into the same failings. But our penitence for gross and deliberate sins must evidence itself by forsaking them, else it hath no claim to pardon. And indeed the repentance, encouraged by so many noble promises in the New Testament, is that which accompanied the conversion of Jews and Heathens to Christianity; but the remission of wilful offences, committed after professing it, (and we have professed it from our childhood) will be found very sparingly mentioned. For it is expected of christians to keep the laws of Christ, else they *receive his grace in vain* *. However, there are, God be thanked, assurances of mercy given to the worst of us, on returning from our transgressions. But none are given to sorrow without amendment. If any were, the whole intent of the gospel would be defeated, and *Christ* be made the *minister of sin* †.

We must not therefore imagine, that a little or a great deal of grief in sickness, if we could be sure of feeling it then, which we cannot, will intitle us to forgiveness. For the bitterest of such anguish may have neither piety nor virtue in it, but be merely the concern of a malefactor, (continuing in his heart as much so as ever) that he is likely to be punished for his deeds. Or suppose there be some convictions of a better kind, grounded even on christian faith; yet when there is no time for trying what fruits they will bring forth, and when multitudes, after the like convictions, have immediately or soon relapsed into their old iniquities, what dependance can there be upon them? God indeed knows, if they would, in case of recovery, be effectual; but he who feels them hath no means of knowing it. And were he certain that they would, how doth it appear, that when they come so late, they will be accepted? The penitent thief,

* 2 Cor. vi. 9.

† Gal. ii. 17.

thief, whose pardon is the chief argument alledged to prove this point, might possibly repent long before he was taken, might be taken long before he was executed, might have no knowledge of the gospel, till he hung with our Saviour upon the cross; and he exercised there a faith so circumstanced, as ours cannot be: on all which accounts there is no room for a parallel to be drawn between him and wicked christians now, who continue obdurate till the approach of death.

And what shall we say then concerning them? The mild spirit of our religion will not permit us to judge harshly of them; faithfulness to the souls of men will not suffer us to pronounce in their favour. All we can determine with certainty therefore is, that such repentance as they still remain capable of, united with christian faith, is the best and only thing to which they can have recourse. Right behaviour then will certainly make their case in some degree better; and wrong behaviour, even then, when every thing conspires to remind them of what they ought to have remembered sooner, must make it unspeakably worse. Their duty therefore is clear, be their hopes ever so doubtful; and there is always room for some hope whilst life is preserved. They may have more time, they have more mercy granted them, than they can see cause to expect. God is not, even in their case, a cruel being enraged, but a wise and good one justly displeased. Frightening themselves beyond a capacity of thinking and acting reasonably must do harm, be their spiritual condition ever so dangerous. They cannot know it to be desperate, and therefore ought by no means to give it up. Still, on the other hand, though God may assure them internally of pardon and happiness, yet in general very strong persuasions of that kind, in such circumstances, are greatly to be suspected as enthusiastic, delusive imaginations: and the moderate and less confident men are, the better grounded is their prospect. But so extremely uncomfortable a one will it ordinarily prove, that there is great weight in the son of Sirack's precept: *Before judgment examine thyself, and in the day of visitation thou shalt find mercy. Humble thyself before thou be sick: in the time of sins shew repentance—and defer not until death to be justified* *.

The penitence, left to a bed of languishing, ought to be only
the

* Eccles. xviii. 20, 21, 22.

the more solemn completion of that which we practised daily in our health. And most of us have so much to rectify, and all have so much need to do it well, be it more or less, that we should not fail to take the earliest and surest time for it; when it will be most acceptable to God, and most advantageous to our own souls; when there will be least ground for doubt and scruple afterwards, whether we left our sins, or they left us; whether we acted on ingenuous, or servile motives. But whatever we have unhappily omitted till sickness calls, let us then at least set about it instantly; not be ashamed of repenting, or being known to repent, for it is in sinning that the only shame lies; not be satisfied with feeling, and owning to men a sense of our guilt, as far as it relates to them; but confess to God our disobedience and ingratitude to him, with the deeper contrition, the longer we have neglected it. *Hezekiah's* prayer indeed hath no confession of sin, but his thanksgiving afterwards hath a very strong one: *Thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back* *. And therefore, when he pleaded at first, *Remember, O Lord, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee with a perfect heart, and done that which is good in thy sight* †, we should understand him to mean, that as a king he had been zealous for God's true religion, to which consequently his life was of importance; not that as a man he had not deserved death, which all men have. And if we are convinced in any due degree what our deserts have been, we shall entreat the divine mercy, not for the merits, I said it before, and I say it again, not for the merits of our good actions, for the best of them are faulty; not for the sake of our repentance, which in strictness undoes nothing that we have done amiss, and therefore (though our natural power extends no further) cannot intitle us even to exemption from punishment, much less to eternal rewards; but solely through his satisfaction and intercession, who died to obtain both for us.

A just sense of this invaluable blessing will effectually incline us to join with our thankful humiliations, a zealous performance of whatever duties are opposite to our past sins, and whatever mortifications are proper to correct our present evil tendencies. But no useless and fanciful observances, nor any austerities, calculated only to give uneasiness for the sake of giving it,

VOL. I.

L 1

should

* Isa. xxxviii. 17.

† Ver. 3.

should ever enter into a christian's penitence. For such things take off the attention from real obligations, and fix it on themselves, as matters of the greatest moment: whence the punctual performers of them are tempted to spiritual pride; and others, who see this great stress laid on them, are induced either to esteem them without cause, or to disesteem religion, falsely supposing it to enjoin them. Therefore the scripture directs returning offenders neither to empty forms, nor to the rigours of corporal discipline, any farther than to such occasional use of fasting, as may be found beneficial, but *to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with their God* *. And least of all should the sick be harrassed with needless burdens. For they have one already, of no small weight, laid on them by God himself; I mean the disease which he hath inflicted, and bearing that as they ought, will seldom fail to be labour sufficient.

Merely feeling the pressure of it indeed will do us no service, without attending properly to him from whom it comes. On the contrary, when God saith, *In vain have I smitten your children, they received no correction* †, it implies that they were hardened in wickedness; whereas, when *the voice of the Lord crieth, the man of wisdom will bear the rod, and who hath appointed it* ‡. Yet still worse would it be, if, perceiving whence our sufferings proceed, we should be wrongly affected towards the author of them; either with their blasphemous vehemence, of whom the scripture foretels, *They shall fret themselves, and curse their God, and look upwards* §; or with his profane dependency, who said, *This evil is from the Lord, why should I wait for the Lord any longer* ¶? But if we apply to him with humble confession, and sincere amendment, like Ephraim in *Jeremiah*, *thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised; after I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh, I was ashamed, yea, even confounded* **: we shall have cause to say with the Psalmist, *It is good for me that I have been in trouble, that I might learn thy statutes* ††. We should learn our duty from God's mercies, but if these make us forget him, chastisement is fitly employed to make us recollect him. *I will cause you to pass under the rod, and bring you into the bond of the covenant;—and ye shall remember your ways, and all your doings, wherein ye have been defiled:—and ye shall loathe yourselves*.

* Mic. vi. 8.

† Jer. ii. 30.

‡ Mic. vi. 9.

§ Isa. viii. 21.

¶ 2 Kings vi. 33.

** Jer. xxxi. 18. 19.

†† Psal. cxix. 71.

selves in your own sight, and know that I am the Lord *. By this shall the iniquity of Jacob be purged; and this is all the fruit to take away his sins †. When therefore God hideth his face from us, and we are troubled ‡ with uneasiness of body or mind, though it may be only to make us, like the captain of our salvation, perfect through sufferings §; yet we shall do well to inquire with humility, though not with causeless terror, whether his purpose is not what the prophet declares in his name: *I will go, and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence;—in their affliction they will seek me early ¶*. If on self-examination we find little or nothing but common frailties to charge upon ourselves, we shall have abundant reason to rejoice in all our tribulations, and be thankful to his preventing grace. If we discover grosser failings, our concern is, to answer the divine expectation, as the next verse directs: *Come, and let us return unto the Lord, for he hath torn, and he will heal us; he hath smitten, and he will bind us up ***. Such behaviour will procure us the removal, or mitigation of our sufferings at present, if infinite wisdom sees it best for us. But however this be, it will certainly obtain for us that future recompence of everlasting felicity, which the words, that follow there naturally express, perhaps with an allusion to the time of our Lord's resurrection, the foundation and first-fruits of the general one: *After two days will he revive us, in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight ††*.

* Ezek. xx. 37, 43, 44.

† Is. xxvii. 9.

‡ Ps. civ. 29.

§ Heb. ii. 10.

¶ Hos. v. 15.

** Hos. vi. 1.

†† Ver. 2.

S E R M O N XXIV.

THE DUTIES OF THE SICK.

ISAIAH xxxviii. 1, 2.

In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death: and Isaiah the prophet, the Son of Amos, came unto him, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live. Then Hezekiah turned his face towards the wall, and prayed unto the Lord.

FROM these words I have proposed to shew you the duties of sick persons.

- I. Respecting their fellow-creatures; expressed by the direction, *set thine house in order:*
- II. Respecting more immediately God and their own souls; intimated in the good king's behaviour, *Then Hezekiah prayed unto the Lord.*

The former of these I have finished, and made some progress in the latter: under which, after setting before you, in general, the necessity of having regard to God in our sickness; I proceeded to the particular obligations, first of faith in his word (giving at the same time directions to those who are disquieted by doubts and scruples); then of self-examination in his presence; then of such repentance as our case requires. And here I insisted largely on the danger of trusting to a death-bed sorrow; and yet the usefulness of feeling and expressing then, rather than never, a due concern for our past sins: which, I observed to you, must always be accompanied with earnest petitions for pardon, offered up in the name of our blessed Redeemer; and for assistance from the grace of the Holy Spirit; with rational and scriptural, not superstitious, proofs of our humiliation;

humiliation; and a hearty desire to amend and improve under the discipline of heaven.

I now go on to remind you farther, that together with these, the sick ought to be very constant in every other exercise of private piety. For as they are cut off from active life, they have more leisure for religious contemplation. And as they want all the improvement and comfort which they can have, so they will receive the most of both, by frequent lifting up of their hearts to *the God of patience and consolation* *, the giver of all good, in addresses carefully suited to their present condition. But usually, if not always, the right manner of doing this will be, not to set yourselves tasks of reading, or meditating, or praying, just so often, or so long; but to observe with impartiality and discretion, what really edifies, and what only flattens you; as also what your strength and spirits will permit, without suffering by it. And if there be need, you should allow other persons of skill and seriousness to judge for you in this matter; following their decisions with some degree of implicit obedience. And should it prove, that with your best management you can neither pray to God, nor think of him, with any thing near the affection and fervency, which you find expressed in many good books, and shewn by many good Christians, when sick; but in a poor, imperfect, broken, languid manner: bear with yourselves for what you cannot help; and be assured, that your heavenly Father will bear with you, and will accept the service of which your weakness is capable, be it ever so small.

Nay further, should your condition be such as to require a considerable share of your hours to be spent in a thoughtless trifling way; submit to it, as part of your duty; and do it without scruple. Were you indeed to make amusements your choice, as the means of banishing serious thought, that would be a great and dangerous sin. To throw away the time of sickness after throwing away that of health; and imagine it too soon for you to think of religion while you are well; and too much for you when you are ill; is a method which must end unhappily. But in the necessary intervals of attention to better things; when, if you were not to spend your hours thus, you would spend them worse; when your spirits would sink,
and

* Rom. xv. 5.

and your patience wear out : then cheerful discourses, or any relaxations that are innocent, that will revive no wrong impressions, and excite no blameable movements of mind, may be very useful : provided, that if you have indulged them too much before, you firmly bind yourselves now to be wiser for the future, if God continue your life ; and that you give earnest of it, by employing no more of your time thus, than is requisite, in order to employ the rest better. For *miserable comforters* * are these things alone : and wretched creatures they who have no other to depend on. Whatever superficial palliative remedies it may be needful to intermix, the fundamental support of a pious mind will ever be that of the Psalmist : *Why art thou so heavy, O my soul ; and why art thou so disquieted within me ? O put thy trust in God* †.

The causes of dejection in sickness are of many sorts : but religion hath a perfect cure, if suitably applied, for every one of them, as will appear by going through the chief.

Some have so painful a conviction of their own guilt, though perhaps by no means uncommonly great, that they fear it can never obtain pardon. Yet, by the influence of God's grace, they have quitted the more wilful of their sins long ago, and watch against the rest with constant care : they have the firmest belief in general of God's love to mankind through Christ, and in their more composed hours receive much comfort from their own happy change. But still at other times, and especially when they think of their end, as probably approaching, their hopes are depressed by a load of terrors, and tormenting apprehensions, that they are not qualified *to find mercy of the Lord in that day* ‡. Indeed they rather conceive, that more advantageous thoughts of their condition would be presumptuous, and increase their condemnation. But certainly it is no part of our duty at all, to think worse of ourselves than the truth ; but a fault, to be *swallowed up with overmuch sorrow* §, when our heavenly Father invites us to thankfulness and joy ; as doubtless he doth every one, who repents, believes and obeys. In that case therefore, questioning whether his goodness extends to us, is doing it an injury. And often these very persons are sensible of this ; but misled by it into a second error.

They

* Job xvi. 2.

† 2 Tim. i. 18.

‡ Ps. xlii. 5, 6.

§ 2 Cor. ii. 7.

They first imagine their transgressions cannot be forgiven; then have scruples whether this imagination can be forgiven: and thus are miserable successively on each account, whereas they need not be so on either. For their distrust is involuntary, mere infirmity: which God will never impute to them, if they confess it to him, and strive against it as well as they can; but will hear their prayers, and grant them relief in his good time.

Others are persuaded, that their sickness is a judgment inflicted on them for this or that particular fault; and they cannot bear the weight of the Almighty's anger. But perhaps his intent is, not to punish, but to warn and preserve, or merely to try and to improve you. *For whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth: and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth* *. Or if he is displeased, would not letting you go on unchecked have been a far more dreadful judgment? He now calls you to repent, and amend: and when you have done that, he may take off his hand. Or should he extend his correction even to the destruction of the flesh, yet by the very means of that wholesome severity, your spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus †. Since therefore you have happily avoided the common extreme, of despising the chastening of the Lord, avoid but also the other, of fainting when you are rebuked of him ‡, and all will be well.

Some again, upon whom infirmities continue long, make heavy complaints, that they are become useless and good for nothing. But what need have you to be good for more than your Maker sees proper? If it be his will to make you of little use, is there not great dutifulness, and therefore great reward, in submitting to it? Yet, after all, may not you be of excellent use, by the example of suffering piously and cheerfully; and by shewing the world, that religion can enable you to give up every thing else? But you had designs, it may be, of doing much good; and shall leave them abortive or imperfect. Why, God will accept your intention, and complete your designs in his own time and way; possibly still by your hands, notwithstanding appearances. But you are unable, in your present condition, to make any provision for your family; perhaps are a burthen to it: and during your illness, or after your death, they that belong to you will be destitute. Why, if this danger

* Heb. xii. 6.

† 1 Cor. v. 5.

‡ Heb. xii. 5.

danger have arisen from any past neglect of yours, you have cause to be concerned for it; yet no more cause to sink under it, than under your other faults: and may humbly hope, that God will be good to your relations and dependents, though you have been deficient. But if you could not help what hath happened, or is likely to happen; commit them cheerfully to him, as you do yourselves; and take comfort from his own words: *Leave thy fatherless children; I will preserve them alive: and let thy widows trust in me* *. All this while you have been only his instrument in supporting them: when he lays you aside, he will make use of some other. And though you may not in the least foresee particularly, what will become of them; yet you well know in general, and let this suffice you, that *a father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation* †. Pray for them therefore earnestly, and take all prudent worldly measures on their behalf; but never be anxious about them. And yet, if you cannot avoid being a little so, remember, that some small excess of kind and laudable affection is an amiable failing; and some defect of faith in trying circumstances hath often been chargeable on very sincerely pious men.

But farther: to many, who are young, it is a heavy grief in their sickness, that far from being blessed with length of days, they are likely to be cut off in their early years, without approaching to what they had considered as the common term of human life. But frequently such persons regain by degrees a comfortable state of health, and outlast a great part of their contemporaries. Or suppose they do not: very few in proportion arrive at old age; and perhaps one half of mankind leave the world before they attain their full growth. God knew best, when it was fit you should come into life: and he knows best also, when and how it is fit you should go out of it. If you are not ready for a change, it is your own fault: you must endeavour to become so, as soon and as well as you can; and others must take warning by you. But if you are prepared, how happy is your case, as the book of *Wisdom* describes it! *He pleased God, and was beloved of him: so that, living amongst sinners, he was translated; yea, speedily was he taken away, lest wickedness should alter his understanding, or*
deceit

* Jer. xlix. 11.

† Ps. lxxviii. 5.

deceit beguile his soul *. How you would use a longer space, or what would befall you in it, you cannot possibly tell: but there have been such multitudes, to whom dying in their prime would have been the greatest felicity, with respect to this world and the next; that if he, who sees all things, sees proper to appoint it for any of us, we have abundant cause to lay down our heads quietly, without murmuring.

Still the desire of life is natural; and, if tempered with due submission, always innocent, sometimes highly virtuous: for it may be strengthened by reasons, private or public, of great moment. And doubtless for such it was, that so much of *Hezekiah's* prayer, as the scripture mentions, was plainly intended to plead for his being spared. God may bring us into danger, only to give us, what we commonly want, a stronger sense of our dependence on him: and this end being obtained, he may continue us here, to do him the service for which he hath thus qualified us. But when it appears a determined call to us, to *arise and depart* †; however *weak the flesh* may be, let the *spirit* be *willing* ‡, and say, *I come, to do thy will, O God* §: yet without reckoning a considerable degree of inward reluctance, if we should feel it, a sin; or even too great a degree to be either a heinous offence, or a bad sign upon the whole. Our blessed Lord himself, who chose to suffer every thing which might instruct us, was probably on that account not intirely exempt from dread of death: but he was intirely obedient under it; and thus furnished us with the fullest proof, that infirmity of nature is very different from rebellion of will, and very consistent with perfect resignation. Indeed so far as reason can influence, the virtuous have much more reason of the two, to fear life than death. The former is beset round with afflictions and hazards: the terrors of going through the latter depend, in a great measure, to all appearance, on imagination. This world, we are sure, hath little good in it: the next hath every thing that we can wish: why should we be unwilling then to make the exchange? At the hour of our departure we are still in the same hands in which we have always been. And therefore should we not say, from the bottom of our hearts: *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me* ¶?

VOL. I.

M m

But

* Wisd. iv. 10, 11.

† Mic. ii. 10.

‡ Matth. xxvi. 41.

§ Heb. x. 7.

¶ Ps. xxiii. 4.

But some are not so much afraid of dying, as of the painful and wearisome road that leads to it. They have suffered already, they think, nearly, if not quite, to the full extent of their patience: yet a great deal more suffering must come; and they shall never support it. But remember, thousands and millions, and amongst them, those of the quickest sensibility and most timorous dispositions, have borne before you as much as you can have to bear: nay, perhaps you have borne yourself much more than remains behind. The same help from above, that enabled you to support yesterday, will enable you to support to-day and to-morrow. And in fact, we all of us bear things very well, which yet we call intolerable; and commonly go through severer and more tedious sufferings, with as firm and calm a spirit as we do lighter and shorter. At least therefore make not yourself miserable before-hand, by drawing frightful pictures of what may never come; or however may fall greatly short of what you imagine. And let the worst come; pray to God, and *look unto Jesus, who endured the cross* *; then set yourself to bear what you can; and you will find, that you can bear what you need. Pain, when moderate, is nothing terrible: and when acute, is seldom long. If you recover, you will soon forget all, or think and talk of it with pleasure: and if you die, that, to a good person, is the completest recovery that is possible. In all events therefore be composed: and to assist yourself in it, avoid, with the utmost caution, all intemperate words and behaviour: for indulging them will only exasperate your mind; and checking them will quiet it very much. Yet never condemn yourself for merely natural expressions of what you feel; (for the most pious men, in scripture, have used very strong ones) nor too rigidly for a little excess in them. A duty so hard, as undergoing sharp torments, or continued wearisomeness, may well admit of some imperfection in the performance, and yet intitle us, through our merciful Father's bounty, to a large recompence. Nor is it criminal in grievous agonies, tiresome confinement, lowness of spirits, or weakness of body, that make us burthens to ourselves and others, humbly to ask, when no other hope of release appears, (if it be God's will) for that of death. Only we must do nothing to hasten it: we must use the means of preserving

* Heb. xii. 2.

serving and supporting life so long as nature permits it to last : and we must not be impatient with heaven, if that be longer than we wish ; but meekly suffer on, and faithfully maintain our post, until the appointed hour, when our great Commander shall call us off to rest.

But besides resignation in sickness, we owe to God thankfulness also, for the numerous other blessings, which we still enjoy ; for the blessing of health, all the time that we did enjoy it ; for every interval and alleviation, every comfort and support, which he hath given us since : for we *are not worthy of the least of all his mercies* *. Nor have we cause to be thankful under sickness only, but thankful for it also. Very possibly this may seem affectation to some, and a *hard saying* † to others. But consider : are we not often highly thankful, and with great cause, for what produces only pain to us at the time ; as in the case of any rough medicine administered, or painful operation performed upon us, necessity so requiring ? Now God is the physician of our souls ; and sickness is one of his principal methods of cure. By this he deadens our immoderate fondness for amusements and pleasures ; and removes us out of the way of temptations to vanity and folly. By this he lowers the swelling vehemence of haughty spirits ; and teaches hard hearts by experience, that misery deserves pity. By this he shews us the emptiness of the present world, the nearness and importance of the next : reminds us of self-inquiry and penitence, meditation and prayer : tries and exercises our faith, our trust, our patience : gives us the opportunity of *offering to him what costs us something* ‡ ; and by employing us in more laborious work, secures to us a more ample reward. The harshest discipline, that is requisite to procure such benefits as these to us, (and it is only *if need be* §, that we are afflicted) surely deserves our utmost gratitude. The more and more constantly our hearts are filled with it, the better and happier we shall be : but if we can arrive no farther, than to be sensible that we have reason for thankfulness ; and to exert accordingly some acts of it from time to time upon recollection ; let it excite no terror in us, but only endeavours to improve. Nor should we imagine, that there is the least inconsistency between

M m 2

thankfulness

* Gen. xxxii. 10.

† 2 Sam. xxiv. 24.

† John vi. 60.

§ 1 Pet. i. 6.

thankfulness for the good intended us by sickness, and earnest desires to feel as little of it, and be treated as gently, as our case will admit. God indeed knows what inward strength we shall have: but we only know what our weakness is; and ought therefore to pray, that if it be his good pleasure, our trial may be moderate.

But whatever it be, we must join our own care with his appointments: else all that we go through may be thrown away upon us; and even, in direct contradiction to his design, hurt us in the future life, as well as the present. This whole matter is beautifully described in the book of *Job*. *If they be bound in fetters, and holden in cords of affliction; then he sheweth them their work, and their transgressions that they have exceeded. He openeth also their ear to discipline, and commandeth that they return from iniquity. If they obey and serve him, they shall spend their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasures.—But the hypocrites (or impure) in heart heap up wrath: they cry not, when he bindeth them**. Let us therefore humble ourselves under his hand†, whenever he lays it upon us; consider the great end of all his corrections, and apply our whole souls to attain it: Perhaps we ought to have practised retirement and self-inspection during our health, and would not; but dissipated and lost ourselves in pursuits and cares, or diversions and trifles. To cure us of this, he confines us to a sick room, where we must be alone and think. Let us then at length do it to good purpose; look back to our conduct in this world, look forward to our portion in the next; *remember God on our bed, and meditate on him in the night-watches‡. Stand in awe, and sin no more; commune with our own heart in our chamber, and be still; offer the sacrifice of righteousness, and put our trust in the Lord§*.

For the better performance of these and all the duties of sickness, and obtaining such a conclusion of it, as may be most expedient for us, religious prudence will direct us to join with our own prayers those of our fellow-christians. To unite us more closely in good will and affection, our Saviour hath appointed, that our prayers shall be common: and hath declared, that *where we are gathered together for this purpose, he is in the midst of us¶*. Accordingly, when St. Peter was in danger,

prayer

* Job xxxvi. 8, 9, 10, 11, 13.

† 1 Pet. v. 6.

‡ Psal. lxxiii. 6.

§ Psal. iv. 4, 5. John v. 14.

¶ Matth. xviii. 20.

prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him *. And St. James's injunction concerning the sick is, *pray for one another, that ye may be healed* †. Nor certainly ought we to intercede less fervently for the souls of our brethren, than their bodies. Therefore in the ancient liturgies, persons dangerously ill were recommended by name to the throne of grace for such mercies as they needed. And our own hath provided, on behalf of *those especially, for whom our prayers are desired*, a most comprehensive request, *for comfort and relief according to their several necessities, for patience under their sufferings, for a happy issue out of all their afflictions*. And we shall both consult our duty and our interest, by intreating a particular share, when our case requires it, in the general supplications of the church of Christ.

But then, if it pleases God to restore us, we must, as we have taken every method of procuring his mercy, take every method of acknowledging it. And one is by suitable acts of devotion. Sincere and fervent thanksgivings at the time are indispensably necessary: and stated returns of them, for more remarkable deliverances, are very becoming and beneficial. But expressions of gratitude in words alone, however warm, are nothing. We must shew it in our whole behaviour: zealously keep alive the good purposes, that we formed in the time of our danger, ~~freely~~ own them; sacredly execute them; always remembering, that the most perfect recovery is but a short reprieve: else our former sins, and more, will enter into our souls, and dwell there; and *our last state be worse than our first* ‡, like that of innumerable poor wretches, who are gone into eternity before us: whereas, if we *pay our vows, which we promised with our lips, and spake with our mouths, when we were in trouble* §; our chastening shall yield us here the peaceable fruit of righteousness ¶; and *our light affliction, which is but for a moment, work for us an eternal weight of glory* **.

Thus I have gone through a large number of directions to the sick. But there is no small danger, that when you are called to the practice of them, some may be forgotten, some misapplied, and others found so short and imperfect, that perplexing

* Acts xii. 5.

† James v. 16.

‡ Matth. xii. 45.

§ Psal. lxxvi. 12.

¶ Heb. xii. 11.

** 2 Cor. iv. 17.

ing difficulties how you are to act, or melancholy doubts what you are too think of your condition, may remain. Now in these cases it is natural to ask the opinion of serious and prudent friends. The more such you have, and the more good use you make of them, the better. But at least the ministers of the gospel are bound to be such to you, as far as they are able, whenever you apply to them. Not only the general nature of our office demands it; but we have all made a particular solemn promise, *to use both public and private monitions and exhortations, as well to the sick as to the whole, within our cures, as need shall require, and occasion shall be given* *. Still we would obtrude ourselves on no one: but we must signify to you our readiness to perform this promise; and indeed our apprehensions, that you are often losers, by not claiming it. What we say to you here, passes with too many for words of course, to entertain you for the present half hour, and be thought of no more. At your own homes, when you are well, you expect to see us only on the same footing with other visitors: and when you are sick, you are unwilling to see us at all. Surely we might be of more service to you, if you would admit us; and particularly we might be so in your more considerable, especially in your more lasting, illnesses; when for a long time together *you are shut up, and cannot go into the house of the Lord* †. We hope you have no reason to fear, that we shall either artfully *make a gain of you* ‡, or otherwise intermeddle in your worldly affairs; or indiscreetly augment your danger by tiring or terrifying you. But if we can preserve you from either vainly terrifying, or fatally deceiving yourselves; can inform, or but remind you, of any part of your duty; or merely assist your patience, and enliven your hope: both ~~you~~ and we shall have cause to rejoice.

Doubtless not a few of you can think of every thing that is proper on such occasions, both in your own case and that of others, better than we can suggest it to you. And *would God, that all the Lord's people were prophets* §; able to officiate thus to themselves, and those around them. But many are not: and such as are, would surely do well, at fitting times, were it only for example's sake, to observe St. James's rule, which
he

* Office of ordaining priests,

† Jer. xxxvi. 5.

‡ 2 Cor. xii. 17, 18.

§ Numb. xi. 29.

he delivers in general terms: *Is any sick among you, let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him**: which prayers were doubtless preceded, or followed, by suitable exhortations. It is true, he directs them particularly in order to a miraculous cure of the sick; and prescribes at the same time, *anointing with oil in the name of the Lord*, which was used in performing such cures. We will not therefore say, that his injunction is exactly suited throughout to the present state of things. But still, though *gifts of healing*† are ceased, and the ceremony belonging to them is become totally superfluous; it remains notwithstanding a Christian duty, *in every thing, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, to let our requests be made known unto God*‡: and petitions for the sick, both public in the congregation, and private in their presence, may be of great efficacy, not only to their spiritual, but their bodily health. *For the fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much*§. Therefore in all ages the elders of the church have attended them: and our own church hath both given directions, and provided an office for that purpose.

Possibly one part of the office may seem to have ascribed so high a power to the minister, of absolving the sick from their sins, as may lead them into great mistakes. And it is indeed more liable to be so misunderstood, than the earlier forms, which were expressed in the manner of a prayer. But still all writers on the subject have agreed, that this absolution either was intended (which indeed is most probable) only to set persons free from any ecclesiastical censures, which they might have incurred: (an indulgence granted in every age of the church to such as were dangerously ill, on their humble request; but which is no more pretended to make a change in their eternal state, than a pardon from the king is) or, if it means also to declare them restored to the favour of God, means it only on supposition of a sincere and thorough repentance; which being professed by them, it may be charitably presumed, though not certainly known that it is real; and without which, I beg you all to observe, no absolution here, granted by whomsoever, or in what words soever, will do you the least good hereafter. Accordingly this form is not appointed

* James v. 14.

† 1 Cor. xii. 9, 28, 30.

‡ Phil. iv. 6.

§ James v. 16.

pointed ever to be used, but when the sick have made, by their own choice, *a special confession of some weighty matter, troubling their consciences, humbly and heartily desiring*, that it may be used for their consolation. And as this is but seldom requested, and consequently the absolution seldom pronounced over any one; so whenever it is, it may and ought to be accompanied with such explanations, as will prevent any wrong constructions.

But there still remains to be mentioned, on this occasion, another act of piety, receiving the holy communion: which, though not particularly appointed in scripture for the sick, hath from the earliest times been recommended to them, and practised by them; as a very fit expression of their thankful faith in the merits of Christ's death; their hope of a future resurrection, as members of his body; and their being in charity with ever other member of it, and all mankind: by the exercise of which graces in this manner, they obtain a title to such assistance from above for going happily through their present time of trial, as must needs be highly valuable to every serious mind.

But then, to enjoy the true benefit of the ordinances of Christ, and the prayers and exhortations of his ministers, you should desire them whilst you are capable of duly attending to them, and acting upon the impressions made by them; not defer them to the last, when they can hardly contribute any thing either to useful direction, or well-grounded comfort; and perhaps may only encourage an imagination, most pernicious to the souls of men, that a few formalities, in the conclusion of life, will atone for spending it ill. If we take refuge in religion with a bad heart unwillingly, it will be of no service to us: and if we really delight in its offices, we shall have recourse to them early; indeed we shall live in the observance of them always; only repeating them more frequently, and if possible, with more intense application of mind, as our need becomes more urgent. For thus our strength will increase with our burthen: and *when our flesh and our heart faileth, God shall be the strength of our heart, and our portion for ever.* *

SER-

† Psal. lxxiii. 26.

S E R M O N XXV.

ON LYING.

PROVERBS xii. 22.

Lying lips are abomination to the Lord: but they, that deal truly, are his delight.

NOTWITHSTANDING the advantages of reason, the condition of mankind would be very low, and indeed very unhappy, if we did not also excell the rest of the creatures, which inhabit this earth, in a greater power of communicating our thoughts one to another. They have much fewer wants: and are taught by nature, almost immediately, how to supply them. But we are purposely formed to need and to give help in every thing, through the whole of our days: and therefore some ready and extensive method of signifying mutually whatever passes within our minds was peculiarly necessary for us. Without this, no person would have more knowledge of any thing than he could attain of himself; or more assistance in distress from his neighbour, than mere conjecture would direct him to think needful, and unrequested goodness incline him to bestow. The pleasure also, as well as the benefits of society, would be reduced to a narrow compass: and life hang upon our hands joyless and uncomfortable. But our gracious Maker hath furnished us with several ways of doing what we find so requisite. Our actions and gestures declare our meanings, in many cases, both clearly and strongly: and our looks have significancy, inexpressible any other way. The most intelligent of other animals come not near us in either of these respects. But yet articulate speech, our more distinguishing property, hath, on the whole, much greater pre-eminences belonging to it: and,

together with the improvement built upon it, of marking down words with ease in lasting characters, hath raised us to a much higher rank in the scale of beings, than we could otherwise have obtained.

Still unhappily, as every blessing in the world may be fatally misused, so there is hardly any one bad purpose, which language, though granted for the most excellent good purposes, may not be, and hath not been, perverted to serve. But it serves the most such, and the most effectually, by being turned from its original design of giving right information to those, with whom we converse, to the opposite one of leading them wrong: a practice so immoral and mischievous, yet so common; and so often seeming to be not only serviceable to the deceivers themselves, but defensible, or however not very blameable, in respect of such as they deceive, that few things are of more importance, than forming just notions concerning our obligations to veracity. And in doing this, though the principal point is to restrain men from taking over-great liberties, yet they must be guarded also against over-great scrupulousness: both because every precept ought to be represented fairly; and because, if this be not, some will be sufferers by observing, and others feel remorse for transgressing, imaginary duties; while much larger numbers, perceiving the rules given them to be in part too strict, will take occasion from thence to flight them all.

In order then to state this whole subject, I shall,

I. Shew, what things are to be reputed lies, and what not.

II. Consider the pleas, which are made to justify some sorts of lying.

III. Those, which are brought to excuse others.

I. The leading question therefore is, what things are to be reputed lies, and what not. Now here,

I. Since actions and gestures, as well as words, may be employed to express what we think; they may be also employed to express what we do not think; which is the essence of a lie. Indeed some of our actions are naturally significative: whereas few of our words have any other import, than arbitrary consent and usage given them, as appears from the different languages of different nations. But then we have never consented to make our actions in general signs of our intentions, as

we

we have our words. And if persons interpret an action of ours to mean this or that, which hath no certain meaning affixed to it, we deceive them not, but they deceive themselves. Nor are we bound, in point of truth, to explain it, in order to prevent this: but in point of charity and humanity we are, if we apprehend, that they may suffer any harm by mistaking, which we can obviate without suffering proportionable harm in their stead. Such actions therefore, as have no determinate sense appropriated to them by agreement, explicit or implied, can be no violations of sincerity: but such as have, are subject to just the same rules with words; and we may be guilty of as gross falsehoods in the former, as in the latter.

2. Words having acquired their significations by the mutual acquiescence of mankind, may change them by the same method. And not only single words may in process of time vary their sense greatly, but combinations of several words may come to have meanings, very different from what the terms, of which they are composed, uninterpreted by practice, would lead one to apprehend. We all know what it is to be *humble*, and to be a *servant* to any one. But a person, who, in the common acceptance of the words, taken separately, cannot say he is either, may safely affirm that he is both, when they are joined together into an usual declaration of mere civility. And in general, whatever form of speech, though false in its primitive sense, is true in that, which custom hath adopted, may be used in it without fault, to those who understand it right: for there can be no lie, where we have no purpose of deceiving. But still, though we may, and possibly in some cases must, comply with such phrases, when once they are established: yet the fewer of them prevail, the better, for several reasons.

The high strained expressions of civility, which are so common, however innocent now, proceeded originally from a mean and fawning and fallacious disposition in those who began them: and tended to nurse up vanity and haughtiness in those, to whom they were addressed. In proportion as they become sayings of course indeed, and lose their meaning, they may lose their mischief. But if others of the same sort are coined from time to time to succeed them, this renews and perpetuates the mischief; besides the further inconveniences of making a language absurd, and imprinting a character of slavishness upon it, under a groundless pretence of refining and polishing it. For none of

these flights were admitted amongst the best-bred people of the ancient world, till they had lost their good taste, as well as their virtue.

And as for the other phrases, of which custom hath changed or annihilated the signification, though, after this is done, they are no longer lies, yet they were lies all the while it was doing: and every new step, taken in the same road, will be a new lie, till every body finds it out, and learns the fashionable interpretation of it. And, as these innovations cannot be soon received universally, they embarrass and intangle timorous minds very grievously, and tempt the irresolute to do what they apprehend is not lawful: while, at the same time, they give those, who are not so scrupulous as they should be, dangerous encouragement to become less so than they were. For such, perceiving themselves authorized by general practice, or perhaps being directed by particular orders, to say in some cases things that look extremely like falsehoods, will easily go on to venture upon the most real falsehoods in any case, when they have occasion for them. These liberties therefore should be as sparingly used, and, when they must be used, as carefully explained to all who are concerned in them, as possible: and a very serious attention shewn to prevent what a great and excellent man calls, *our language running into a lie* *.

3. As to all figures of speech, fables, allegories, feigned histories, and parables, those for instance of our blessed Saviour, and others in scripture, intended only to convey instruction more agreeably or efficaciously, there is evidently no room to condemn these, as deceits. And whenever things are either said or written in such a manner, that the intention is visibly different from what the words would else import, this can never be a breach of truth, and may sometimes be a very proper and engaging way of recommending it. But the case is widely different, when persons, with all the marks of seriousness, affirm what they will afterwards despise and ridicule others for believing. These are plainly designed falsehoods: and in a greater degree, or a less, injurious ones. When they do no worse, they put mens understandings, and tempers too, on a severe trial, without the least right or need: and, which determines the nature of them very clearly, if the hearer doth not expose himself, the speaker is disappointed. Surely this is

foolish

foolish talking, and jesting not convenient *. Nor however little hurt it may sometimes do, is the sentence at all too severe in general, which the wise king hath passed upon it: *As a mad-man, who casteth firebrands, arrows, and death; so is the man, who deceiveth his neighbour, and sayeth, Am I not in sport* †?

4. Concerning ambiguous phrases, which in one acceptation express our meaning truly, but in another do not; it must be observed, that when we are bound, by promise or otherwise, to declare what we know or believe in any case, we are bound to declare it in such terms, as are likely to be well understood: else we fail of what we profess, or ought to do. And, even when we are not thus bound, we should speak of things, if we can safely, with plainness and simplicity. For not only this adds greatly to the agreeableness and instructiveness of conversation; but, which brings it under the present subject, dark and doubtful sayings often deceive people to their detriment, and are too often designed to produce that effect. Yet still there may be reason for reservedness towards some persons, even in trifles. For they, who take the liberty of asking any questions, that may serve their turn, will commonly discover almost as much from the silence of one, who is usually communicative to them, as from his speaking. And whenever, after all our precaution, silence will not conceal a thing, which ought to be concealed, it must be allowable to speak upon the subject in such a manner, as to leave that part of it involved in obscurity, which is not fit to be revealed. Nay, though we foresee it to be probable, that any one, provided he hath no title to information from us, will take our words in a sense, in which we do not use them; yet if that, in which we do use them, be a fair and natural one, and nothing but his own rashness leads him into error; though, as I said before, charity bids us hinder it, if we conveniently can, yet veracity requires it not. For when we design only to keep him ignorant of a fact, it is his own fault, if he will also believe a fancy. But if we go further and lay snares for him; if we give assurances, which, in their obvious and universal acceptation, are false, but only have a latent forced construction, in which, after all, they just may be true: this is equivocation; and cannot be defended, unless the grossest violations of sincerity can be defended too. For the intent of using language to deceive is equally evident in

* Eph. v. 4.

† Prov. xxvi. 18, 19.

in both: and the contrivance of couching the deceit in phrases liable to no suspicion, adds to the crime greater deliberation, and consequently more heinous guilt.

We are now therefore led to consider,

II. The pleas, which are urged to justify some sorts of direct lying.

For more than a few speculative, and some pious men, have imagined, that this practice in certain cases may do much good, and can do no hurt: and then is both allowable and commendable. Speech, they say, was given to mankind solely for their common benefit: nor consequently is it ever used amiss, when it contributes to that end. And this opinion they endeavour to confirm by several instances of falsehoods, which good persons are recorded in scripture to have uttered knowingly. But, besides that some instances, which they produce, are not falsehoods, or were directed by an express authority, which can supersede ordinary obligations: good persons may too possibly both say and do what they ought not, through ignorance of their duty, or infirmity; and their commission of known and great sins is not always related with censure, it being unnecessary: to which it must be added, that some of their actions may be praised in holy writ on the whole, without the least intention of approving the circumstances of insincerity, or other imperfections, with which they were accompanied.

Another argument in favour of their notion, they draw, somewhat surprisingly, from the apostle's words: *putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another* *. The precept, they say, must not be extended further, than the reason of it extends: which being only, that because of our mutual relation, we ought to consult our mutual advantage; where adhering to truth will not promote this, falsehood may be justly substituted. But, though mutual advantage is a very strong tie upon us to speak truth, St. Paul hath not told us here, that it is the only one. And we experience ourselves to be under another more immediate. We feel a natural reluctance in our consciences to lying and deceiving, as such, without looking forward to consequences: and even they who have persuaded themselves that doing it is, in some instances, lawful, cannot do it however, without an inward sense of shame and guilt. Now it deserves to be well considered,

* Eph. iv. 25.

considered, whether transgressing, in order to attain some supposed end of general utility, this dictate of our moral nature, the principle of which God hath planteth there, be any more allowable, than transgressing the dictates of justice or any other moral obligation, with the same view: whether, in short, it be not, what the apostle himself mentions with abhorrence, and that in the very case of a lie, *doing evil, that good may come* *.

Or, though still any one should think, that our native antipathy to speaking falsehood, no more proves it to be always forbidden, than our unwillingness to give others pain, which notwithstanding we may and must give them sometimes, for the sake of a benefit more considerable: yet it must be observed, that the scripture both allows and requires pain and even death to be inflicted in some cases: but uniformly forbids lying, without intimating in any one precept or declaration concerning it, the possibility of an exception. But were the consideration of scripture to be set aside, which it never ought: still on the footing of mere reason and experience, a most important question would remain, what those instances are, in which, on balancing the two sides of the account, violation of truth is more beneficial than detrimental to mankind. For supposing any such can be found, it must be violated in them only. But if none such can be found, or if the advantage be at all doubtful, or not exceeding great, or attainable any other way, in the same or but nearly the same degree: the plain and the safe rule evidently is, that of *simplicity and godly sincerity* † in all cases.

The case indeed of an attack upon our own or our neighbours property, or life, may seem a very favourable one to the opinion, which we are now examining. For here it is argued, that assuredly no one hath a right to rob or to murder; nor consequently suffers any wrong, when he is prevented from doing either. And if telling him a falsehood be the likeliest method of prevention: hath he not forfeited all claim to our telling him truth? And is it not much better in every view, that he should be deceived, than accomplish his wicked purposes? Why, undoubtedly it seems very hard, especially upon the party endangered, to say otherwise. Yet this may and ought to be said, that on the one hand, all the little good, which

* Rom. iii. 7, 8.

† 2 Cor. i. 12.

which a lie, that will scarce be credited, hath any chance for doing, may commonly with prudence be done without it, either by avoiding to answer, or by general and undetermined answers, which are very different things from untruths: and that on the other hand, instead of good, a lie may do much harm: as the vile wretches who attempt to commit such crimes, when they have once or twice found themselves, or others like them, imposed upon, may be provoked by it to grow much more suspicious and barbarous, than they would have been else. Therefore it may be doubted whether, in the main, transgression of truth, even in these circumstances, prevents or produces mischief. Surely then he, who refuses to transgress it, acts a worthier part: and, if he suffers any thing on that account, he suffers it *for the sake of a good conscience towards God* *.

Another case is that of enemies in war: whom having a right to kill, it is said, we cannot but have a right to deceive, that being the smaller hurt of the two. And yet, not only such deceivers are treated with peculiar severity in war, as worse than common enemies; but faith must be preserved, even in the midst of arms: else a state of hostility would be yet more calamitous than it is, and besides would be endless too. For overtures of truce or peace could have no effect, if no confidence remained between the contending parties. Add to this, that if one side may deceive, the other may: and so neither is in a better condition, than if both abstained from it: and indeed the attempt of it by both, will for the most part be ineffectual †.

A third case, in which many plead for the lawfulness of making free with truth, is in dealing with those, who have either lost in a great measure the use of their understandings, or are not yet sufficiently arrived to it. For it is argued, that these have no title to conduct themselves, because they have no ability of doing it: and since the only service, that truth can do them, is conducting them properly; and instead of that, it will often only discompose them, and make them refractory: if employing falsehood will lead them on quietly in the right way,

* 1 Pet. ii. 9. iii. 21.

† *Polyb.* l. xiii. p. 671. condemns deceit in princes and generals, even against enemies: which he saith the *Achaïans* used not, and the *Romans* not much. He adds, p. 673. that truth always gets the better of falsehood sooner or later.

way, it can be no injury, and may be a great advantage to them. But consider; persons naturally weak, or, through infirmities, decayed in their intellects, may be managed, with a little skill and care, intirely to their satisfaction, or however may soon be pacified again, by methods very consistent with sincerity. And they, whose disorder is a species of madness, are not only for the most part incredibly jealous, but more sagacious too, than is often imagined: And to what degrees, both of rage and violence, deceits, attempted upon them and detected, will drive them, can scarce be credited. Whereas plain dealing, if proper authority be mildly assumed along with it, will generally soon subdue them once for all; most of them submitting readily to it from a secret consciousness of their own state. Then as to children: it is true, they are easily cheated, and so for a while easily quieted. But what follows? That they quickly come to see through these artifices, and then are much more intractable than before, and quite outrageous on the very apprehension of your repeating them. Your credit with them is lost, the next time you want to use it for their good: and their sole aim for the future is to deceive the deceiver, gratify their own inclinations, and carry their own ends. Now treating them with fairness and steadiness, telling them only so much as was proper, but nothing that they should ever find to be otherwise than they were told, would have totally different effects: would teach them betimes to hear reason and yield to it; would prevent their agitating themselves with perpetual fits of passion, by shewing them clearly, what they were to expect, what they were to consider as unfit; and, which is a much greater benefit still, would habituate them from the first to integrity and honesty in their own behaviour: whereas perhaps one of their chief inducements to that vile trick of lying; of which most of them get something, and too many so much, that they never leave it; is what really makes their condition a pitiable one: that they learn it originally from its being used towards themselves by those, who afterwards reprove and punish them for it.

The last case, which I shall mention, is that of sick persons: concerning whom it is alledged, that common good nature directs us to conceal from them sometimes, be it ever so much at the expence of truth, the real name of their disease, the danger of their situation, the sort of medicines given them, and all facts

of all kinds, which, if known, might deject or disturb them: for that not only such deceit is useful, but they, upon whom it is practised, will, when recovered, approve it, and be thankful for it; nay, perhaps have already approved it, and set the example of it on former like occasions, and therefore have in effect consented to it now. But, plausible as this plea may appear, the need and the benefit of employing falsehood, even in these circumstances, for the most part at least, *cometh of evil* *. It is because people will not in the time of their health become virtuous and reasonable, pious and resigned, that they want the wretched support of untruths in the time of sickness. And if they, who are about them, scruple to support them thus, as they well may, then they are void of all consolation. But even supposing the lies, which they wish for, are told them; they will seldom be told so, as neither to be found out, nor suspected: and suspicions will often disturb sick persons more fatally, than knowing the worst would. Or, let prevarications of this kind work ever so happy effects on some particular occasions, yet there follows a most dreadful general inconvenience from them: that because some must needs be told their condition is hopeful and safe, though it be not; others are told in vain, that theirs is so, though it be; for their friends, they think, will affirm any thing, to please them. And thus, no more may recover by being deceived, than may be lost by the impossibility, arising from hence, of knowing that they are not deceived. Their lives may depend on the composedness of their spirits: their spirits would have been composed, if they could have believed those who attend them: but being sensible what liberties they will take in these matters, they cannot believe them; and therefore can have no relief or comfort from their assurances.

However, it must be owned, that in most or all of the above-mentioned cases, there are sometimes difficulties, with which we have much more cause to pray God we may never be tried, than to be confident that we shall judge and act rightly, if we are. And therefore, though adhering strictly to truth, as the rule, which our Maker hath given us, and trusting Him with the consequences, evidently appears to be the securest way: yet, if any one ventures to deviate from it with a visibly good intention, we should not, I think, pronounce a severe sentence upon him, considering how prone the best of us is to err in
plain

* Matth. v. 37.

plainer things ; always provided, that the liberties, which he takes, be few and modest, and almost extorted from him ; and conscientiously restrained to things in themselves the least exceptionable. But if persons, because something may be colourably said for making a little free with truth on very uncommon occasions, where no one seems injured by it, will indulge themselves in whatever falsities they please on almost any occasion : if, because it hath been apprehended, that malefactors, and those with whom we are at war, have no right to veracity ; and that such, as are incapable of judging at all for themselves, may be deceived for their advantage by others ; if, I say, upon this, they will imagine they are allowed to treat one part of mankind as villains and enemies, with whom no faith is to be kept, and another as children and fools, upon whom they may freely impose any way : this must proceed from a bad heart ; and the tendency of it is, to dissolve intirely the bonds of human society, and open a high road to all possible wickedness and universal confusion. The arguments, were they ever so specious, for the lawfulness of fraud in seemingly harmless cases, can never prove it lawful in others of a nature quite contrary. But, I beg it may be observed, the extreme danger, which there is notwithstanding, of mens proceeding in falsehood to very pernicious lengths, if once they begin, is a most unanswerable objection against its being permitted in any degree at all.

A consideration so interesting must be urged more at large : and shall, God willing, the next opportunity. But I hope you have already seen very great reason to follow the son of *Sirach's* wife counsel. *Use not to make any manner of lie : for the custom thereof is not good* *.

* Eccles vii. 13.

S E R M O N XXVI.

ON LYING.

PROV. xii. 22.

Lying lips are abomination to the Lord: but they, that deal truly, are his delight.

AS the advantages, derived to mankind from the superior power, which we enjoy, of communicating our thoughts one to another, are very great; so the perversion of it to wrong uses is very pernicious. And no perversion of it can be so complete, as when we employ it, instead of informing others, to deceive them. Now, of the more importance it is, that we should not be guilty of this crime, the more necessary it must be, that we should know, wherein it consists, and how insufficient the pleas are, which in some circumstances have been made in its favour. Therefore I began to discourse on the subject of our obligation to truth, by shewing,

I. What things are, and are not, breaches of it.

II. What breaches are unwarrantably by some persons thought justifiable.

And under this latter head, I first proved, that scripture enjoins veracity, without authorizing any exceptions, and that indeed it is, in its own nature, a duty, independently of consequences: then I confuted or counterbalanced the good effects ascribed to the violation of it in several particular cases: and lastly, intimated the general danger, to which they who depart from it, expose themselves, and tempt others, of running on from one liberty to another, till at length they venture to say, and afterwards to do, any thing, which they imagine will contribute to a good end: a practice productive of such dreadful evils, that I must enlarge upon it somewhat further.

Things,

Things, which every one allows to be good, no one needs to be cheated into. And where opinions differ, neither God nor man hath given us a right to bring over others into our own by falsehood: and on what foundation then can we take such a step? I may think perhaps, that this or that thing would be for the benefit of the world, or of such a part of it, or individual in it. But this no more empowers me to use fraud, than to use force, for accomplishing it. Another person may think, at the same time, a different or a contrary thing beneficial: and may have as high an esteem of his own judgement as I have of mine. If then I may employ deceit to serve my purpose, why not he to serve his? Now what can this end in, but the ruin of all integrity, and all confidence, amongst men? And what good can there be in view, that bears any proportion to such a calamity?

But some argue: our opposers will certainly use falsehood for their bad ends: if therefore we do not use it for our good ones, they have a plain advantage over us; and we shall be undone, for want of turning their own weapons against them. Now if this were the case; it would only be the case of suffering for truth, which is suffering for God: and hereafter, at least, no one will be a loser by that. But indeed, at present, upon the whole, the contrary is the case. If your opposers have recourse to unfair arts, detect those arts in them, and abstain from them yourselves: and, whatever difficulties you may be under for a time, in the conclusion all will come out well. *A lying tongue is but for a moment: but the lip of truth shall be established for ever* *. Uprightness, with only common prudence, will not fail to get the better at length: and the reason, why we experience it no oftener, is indeed that we try it so seldom. In the midst of our complaints, we do the very things of which we complain. This is no combat of fair dealing against unfair, but of craft against craft: and perhaps our own artifices contribute more, than those of our adversaries, towards the loss of our cause. For the surest way of missing our aim is to sink in our credit. Therefore let the end, that we propose, be ever so good, it is neither right nor wise to use falsehoods for attaining it.

But, in fact, the ends proposed to be served by this method,
fall

* Prov. xii. 19.

fall usually very far short of being near so good as they are pretended to be. Some blameable gratification, some worldly interest, some party point, the promotion of some bad or doubtful cause, is the thing, which people, on such occasions, have at heart, however studiously they disguise their aims to others, and, if possible, to themselves. These are the purposes, for which truth is to be depressed, imposture countenanced; some considered as too weak, others as too wicked, to be treated with common honesty. And thus every one, who can but think hardly enough of those from whom he differs, sets himself at liberty to speak to them, or of them, as insincerely as ever he will. And if he may venture upon false assertions, he will be apt to think, why not upon false oaths? And, if for the service of the public or his friends, why not for his own? How shocking a state of things would this introduce! Hear the prophet's description of it: *They bend their tongues, like their bow, for lies; but they are not valiant for the truth upon the earth: for they proceed from evil to evil, and they know not me, saith the Lord. Take ye heed every one of his neighbour; and trust ye not in any brother: for every brother will utterly supplant, and every neighbour will walk with slanders. And they will deceive every one his neighbour, and will not speak the truth: they have taught their tongue to speak lies, they weary themselves to commit iniquity. Thine habitation is in the midst of deceit: through deceit they refuse to know me, saith the Lord*.*

Nay, further yet, if persons may falsify and perjure, where shall they stop? It will be said, why not purloin, why not rob, why not murder, to serve a good purpose, that is, a convenient one, for others, or themselves! Each liberty taken leads on, by a plain high road, to a greater: and observe, I intreat you, what a figure they make together in the word of God. *By swearing, and lying, and killing, and stealing, and committing adultery, they break out, and blood toucheth blood. Therefore shall the land mourn, and every one that dwelleth therein shall languish†.*

But could we restrain the advocates for falsehood, and their disciples, to this offence only, and even to the seemingly more innocent sorts of it: yet real religion, real virtue, the real happiness of mankind, I believe have never on the whole been served

* Jer. ix. 3,—6.

† Hos. iv. 2, 3.

served by such arts : and seldom, if ever, hath it been designed that they should. Superstition indeed, and enthusiasm, have been greatly promoted by them : and infidelity not a little. For the lies framed in favour of religion have strangely discredited the truths urged in favour of it. And besides, as some have thought it useful, and therefore allowable, to affirm whatever would conduce to the propagation of orthodox belief : others, on the same principle, have thought it as allowable to do the same thing for the propagation of unbelief. And, as the former have counted nothing too bad to be reported of those whom they deemed the enemies of the faith : so the latter have thought scarce any thing, either too opprobrious to be said, or too improbable to be swallowed, in relation to the teachers and advocates of it. One side exclaims against religious, the other against irreligious, frauds ; and so far as either are committed, both are in the right : but both lamentably overlook the obvious rule, that neither should impute them unjustly, and neither be guilty of them at all. The mischiefs of the falsehoods invented to decry revelation are as plain, as, (what surely admits no doubt) its importance to the outward tranquillity, the inward peace, the present, the future welfare of men. And the sinfulness of falsehoods to support it, cannot be more strongly expressed, than in the words of *Job* : *Hear now my reasonings, and hearken to the pleadings of my lips. Will ye speak wickedly for God, and talk deceitfully for him ?—Is it good, that He should search you out ? or as one man mocketh another, do ye so mock him ?—Shall not his excellency make you afraid, and his dread fall upon you ?**

Thus far I have spoken concerning the lies, which to some have seemed lawful. And now I proceed to speak,

III. Of such, as too many are apt to account excusable.

They own them to be in strictness faulty ; but extenuate the fault in their imagination, till it comes to appear little or nothing ; and then venture upon them as freely, as if they were expressly permitted.

Thus, for instance, when persons have done amiss, and want to conceal it, if deviating a little from truth will have that effect, and keep all quiet ; they fancy it is a tolerably harmless method of preventing, at a cheap rate, a good deal of anger or contempt in others, and shame, if not further inconveniences, to themselves :

* *Job* xiii. 6, 7, 9, 11.

themselves: But surely they ought to consider, that having committed one blameable action, which perhaps is but a folly, can never give them a privilege of committing a second, which is a sin. Besides, very few wrong things are done, but somebody hath a right to inquire into them, and be made acquainted with them. Now denying them to such, is plainly injurious to them; and according to the nature of the case, may be highly prejudicial. Nay, persons who have no title to any information, are intitled however not to be misled by false information: which often may do them disservice in many ways. Further, the hope of hiding faults thus, encourages the commission of them beyond all things: till there is hardly any wickedness, that some poor wretches will not venture upon; because they imagine there is hardly any from which they cannot clear themselves pretty well, in the opinion of others, by a few round assertions or denials, that seem to cost them little. But indeed nothing in the world costs them so dear, as this vile practice: for it continually accumulates fresh guilt upon them, engages them deeper, and entangles them more inextricably in bad ways; till they neither know how to mend, nor to get it believed, if they do. Commonly they are detected soon, always at last: and the older offenders they are, before that happens, the heavier load of disgrace and discredit falls upon them. But supposing they are able intirely to remove all suspicion from themselves: they well know, (which is a dreadful aggravation of their crime,) that ordinarily speaking, it must light on others, who are innocent. Nay, too frequently they are led on, (for the temptation, when once they have begun, is a dangerous one) to charge others in order to acquit themselves; or at least to insinuate concerning them what they are not bold enough to affirm.

The sin of falsehood therefore, on these occasions, being so mischievous and ensnaring, we should be very cautious not to drive into it those, who are under our influence, by severity when they happen to misbehave: but pass over slight failings with a moderate notice, if any; and grant them an easy pardon for weightier ones, on a penitent acknowledgement of them. Only we must not allow them to impose upon us by a pretended sincerity and concern, that produce no effect. For if once they learn a habit of doing wrong without fear, because coming and owning it will set all right again; we shall have no longer
any

any authority over them, or hold upon them. Nay, in a little time, they will come to flatter themselves that God will be as weakly forgiving as we are. And no error can be more fatal, than to imagine, that with Him mere confession will supply the place of reformation.

Another occasion, on which persons are very apt to think violation of truth excusable in themselves and their friends, though they exclaim against it vehemently when they suffer by it, is in speaking ill of those, who have injured or provoked them. Aspersing others in cool blood, is condemned as universally as it is practised. But when any one hath been the aggressor; and so, we conceive, deserved it from us; (and truly a very trifling, or even imaginary offence, will deserve, in the estimation of some people, the bitterest returns;) then we are strangely inclined to load them with whatever accusations we can hope to get believed, and sometimes more. Not only what we have no sufficient cause to think true, but what we have abundant cause to think false, we are tempted to say of them at such times; and fancy it is almost a justification of us, if we can plead, that we did not begin. Yet perhaps we did, if the case were fairly stated. But supposing the contrary: Is there any pretence for our turning liars and slanderers, because others are inconsiderately, or even designedly injurious? May not we thus easily become as bad or worse than they? Is it not the sure method of exasperating, and perpetuating enmity? And why should we not rather acquire the approbation of God and of our own hearts, the esteem of the world and of our adversaries themselves, by treating their reputations with generous tenderness?

But be it ever so wrong to speak ill of others falsely, yet speaking a little too well of any one, we may imagine, can never be much blamed: an act of so much good-nature may seem almost a meritorious transgression. But in reality, besides that doing this by no means proceeds always from benevolence, but too commonly from interested views, or even malicious purposes; let it proceed from what it will, it often produces most lamentable bad effects. By raising persons characters, or magnifying their circumstances beyond truth, you may induce others to enter into engagements with them, or to repose confidences in them, that may prove very fatal: you may occasion their being employed in affairs of importance, to which they

are unequal ; whence dreadful mischiefs have come : you may, by exalting them, be the means of disappointing, depressing, ruining their much worthier rivals : And you contribute to annihilate that distinction between one man and another, which public welfare, no less than private justice, requires to be kept up. Therefore, though, doubtless, we ought to be chiefly cautious what harm we say of our neighbours ; yet, in some cases especially, we ought to be very cautious too, what good we say of them, though still we should charitably hope and believe as much, as with any reason we can.

And as designedly giving people a better character to others than they merit, is not excusable : so neither is extolling to themselves their virtues or accomplishments beyond the due bounds, be it by gross flattery, or by refined ; though pleas are urged for it, both as demanded by the rules of civility, (whereas indeed these rules are very consistent with those of sincerity) and as the way to make them become what they are told they are. Now, on the contrary, this is the way to make them think they need neither to amend nor improve ; to fill their hearts with vanity, and their behaviour with insolence ; to encourage them in their favourite follies and vices ; and thus lead them into disesteem and wretchedness. The commendation which persons deserve should very seldom be given them fully to their faces : but giving them more, and persuading them they are already in rightful possession of that high character, which they should only be taught to aim at, and at most to hope for in due time, generally proceeds from weak fondness or interested baseness ; and rarely intends, and scarce ever doth them any good.

Another case, in which the speaking of untruths is considered in a light much too favourable by the parties, who fancy they find their account in it, is that of trade. For they alledge, that though, undoubtedly, it is very unhappy and very wrong ; yet, in fact, falsehood hath prevailed in this part of human affairs to such a degree, that veracity cannot support itself : they must do as others do, or they must be ruined. Now indeed there is no question, but wicked people have thrown many difficulties in the way of such, as else would be honest. And *woe unto them, by whom the offence*, for it is a dangerous one, *cometh* * : who, making advantages of fraud, bring disadvantages on uprightness.

* Matth. xviii. 7.

ness. But still the necessity of prevarication, in order to thrive, is merely a pretence, of bad persons originally, by which others have too easily suffered themselves to be deceived, and so adopted it. A *lying tongue* may carry some points: but will not *the lip of truth* gain ground of it upon the whole? Is it nothing, or is it not the greatest of all things, that we must love to deal with them, in whom we find that we can place confidence? It is both safer and easier. And thus, though they may have inconveniences to struggle through at first; yet, when once they have established a character, the benefits of it will be certain and durable. Doubtless many a fair trader hath failed: but then some accidental great loss, or want of skill, or of prudence, or diligence, or obliging behaviour, hath been the cause; and seldom, if ever, his integrity. The reputation of that, which cannot be secured without the reality, gives men great pre-eminence above their equals, nay, above their superiors, in other respects. But even were adhering to truth disadvantageous upon the balance of worldly considerations, yet surely it is far better to bear this inconvenience patiently, and make ourselves amends for it by greater industry and frugality, than to infringe a plain duty, and offend our Maker. Let falsehoods be ever so common and successful in all business, and perhaps peculiarly in some: this alters not our obligation. It may moderate our censures of others: but it cannot give a latitude to us in our own behaviour. *That which is altogether just shalt thou follow*, saith the scripture*: and *thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil*†. Nay, to put one of the hardest cases, if any person, in selling me any thing, hath imposed upon me ever so much by falsehood: that doth not give me the least right to impose on another, even in the very same affair. I have been deceived: but this no more authorizes me to deceive the next person I deal with, than having been robbed authorizes me to assault and plunder the next man I meet. The frequency of frauds, and the temptations that arise from thence, are very strong reasons for adding great prudence to our innocence; for being much on our guard, in what professions we engage or continue, with whom we have transactions, to what employments we put out those, who are under our care: but they are no manner of reason, why we should look on the dealings of man with man only as a fair

P p 2

trial

* Deut. xvi. 20.

† Exod. xxiii. 2.

trial of unfair skill, and contribute to make the world worse, because it is so bad already.

One observation further I would make under this head, that, of the more importance the preservation of sincerity in business is, the more we ought to avoid enticing and almost forcing those, with whom we have commercial concerns, into insincerity, in order to satisfy and please us : we should allow them to make, and to own they make, reasonable profits ; we should yield to truth, when we have cause to think we hear it ; and encourage it by favourable treatment, where-ever we see it.

Another occasion, mentioned already, and deserving it again, on which too many reckon lies excusable, is, when they are told to entertain the company. The end being so innocent, and laudable, a small irregularity in the means, they hope, may surely be overlooked. But this entertainment is commonly given at the expence of more persons than one. It seldom fails, but somebody or other is misrepresented to his detriment or discredit. He is certainly injured. They who are misled to a wrong judgment about him, nay about any thing, may be injured by it not a little. The facetious person himself, who takes these liberties in conversation, whatever applause he may gain from the inconsiderate, must never expect any serious esteem, even from them : and, indeed, by trespassing against truth on so slight an inducement as a jest, will bring himself into a temptation, as well as a suspicion, of making still freer with it, whenever that may serve a purpose of greater moment to him. The affectation therefore of being witty by spreading falsehoods is by no means an allowable vanity. Nor indeed can any way of raising our own reputation be at all defended, that is inconsistent with veracity.

Some appear to think it very pardonable, provided they say no harm of others, to say as much good as they please of themselves, true or false. For whom, they argue, doth that hurt ? Why, if you are not believed, it will hurt you that say it, very much. And if you are, it may hurt those who hear it, or hear of it, still more. No one hath a right to put off himself, any more than another, for more than his value : and he who attempts it knowingly, commits, as far as in him lies, a very base, and often very mischievous, fraud. Probably indeed the world will detect him : but that proves only his folly, not his innocence,

Some



Some again contrive a different, and astonishing method of imposing on mankind in this respect. They take a pride in saying, not good, but bad things of themselves, that are not true: profess vile opinions, which inwardly they do not believe; and pretend to have done profligate actions, for which they have not had the heart or the opportunity. For who can forbid them, they imagine, to treat their own characters as freely as they please? And indeed, if it was really their view to become, by these means, objects of public scorn and abhorrence, they have fairly earned it, and one would wish them success. But their seeming unaccountable self-denial is rank ambition. They want to gain credit to wickedness and themselves at the same time: by representing their own lives and principles, as worse than they are, to make those of their disciples worse than they would be; and to place themselves at the head of this chosen band. An employment so diabolical in its plan, and so execrable in its effects, that every good and every wise person is bound to express the extreme detestation of it, which he cannot but feel.

These, I think, are the chief cases, in which one sort or another of persons are apt to reckon falsehood excusable. And if it be, on the contrary, so bad in the best of them, there is no need of shewing particularly, how abominable it must be, when deliberately employed in private or party contests, in supplanting and undermining, in prosecuting schemes of unwarrantable gain, in the service of revenge, malice or envy, in the gratification of idle talkativeness, or of a desire to seem knowing and important. In all these ways, and many more, liars are doing such dreadful mischief, and so continually, that were no other guilt imputable to the *tongue*, well might St. James accuse it of *setting on fire the course of nature, and being set on fire of hell* *.

But in order to apprehend rightly the full extent of this sin, it must be carefully observed, that not only if we affirm any thing which we think to be false, but if we affirm it without cause to think it true, we are still deceivers: or though we have cause to think it true, yet if we affirm it more positively, than we have cause; declaring ourselves to know certainly what we only believe, or to believe firmly what we only

ly

Iy suspect and guess, the case is but little mended: that not only gross falsities, but more refined ones, artful quibbles and mental evasions, dark intimations and hints, not asserting, but insinuating to others, what at least we doubt within ourselves, all come under the same condemnation: nay, that sometimes an affected silence, and at others truth itself, told imperfectly and insidiously, may deeply partake of the guilt of a lie. And lastly, it must be remembered, that, besides the falsehood of asserting what we do not believe, or doing things equivalent, there is another sort, often full as bad, of promising what we do not intend, or do not afterwards take care to perform: and that every lesser degree of expectation given, if it be insincerely given, or the fulfilling of it neglected, is an approach to the same sin.

From all these transgressions then let us conscientiously preserve ourselves: and for that end, avoid the ordinary occasions of them; compose our resentments, moderate our pursuits, mortify our vanity, check our fears, think before we speak, and keep silence rather than speak amiss: For, *in the multitude of words, there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips, is wise* *. For the same end let us frequently reflect, that the comfort and agreeableness of conversation, the continuance of harmony and friendship amongst relations and acquaintance, amongst all indeed, who have concerns with one another, the regular and prosperous management of business, in short, the tranquillity and good order of human society, depends on speaking truth: For the harm, that can be done, without departing from it, is comparatively insignificant. And therefore a liar, till he is found out, is the most mischievous of creatures: and, after he is found out, as he never fails to be, sooner or later, the most hated or the most despised.

Let us consider also, that sincerity is a duty no less plain than important: that our consciences require it of us, and reproach us for every breach of it: that the light of nature taught it the very heathens, though imperfectly, as it did every thing else; and that scripture abounds with the strictest precepts of it, and strongest motives to it. There we learn, that *the devil is a liar*, and by means of lying *was a murderer, from the beginning*; involved our whole race in sin and mis-

ry

* Prov. x. 19.

ry by one falsehood, and practises the same arts upon as many, as he can, to this day. Thus is he *the father of liars*: and, if we are such, *we are of our father the devil, and the lusts of our Father we do* *. But the distinguished character of God is, that he *cannot lie* †, and we ought to be *holy as he is holy* ‡. The blessed Jesus too is *the faithful and true witness* §, who *did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth* ¶; who for *this cause came into the world, that he should bear witness to the truth* ||, and laid down his life to *redeem us from all iniquity* **. Therefore since *Christ our passover is sacrificed for us, let us keep the feast, not with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of truth and sincerity* ††; and *speaking the truth in love, grow up into him in all things, which is the head even Christ* ‡‡. Again, *the spirit of grace* §§ is *the spirit of truth* also, whose office is to *guide us into all truth* ¶¶. Faith and truth are amongst his fruits ||| in those who are regenerated by him. And *the wisdom which is from above, is without hypocrisy* * *. Lie not therefore one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; and have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge, after the image of him that created him †††. Nor doth this appear, in the word of God, to be more our duty, than our interest in respect of both worlds. For in the present, *what man is he that lusteth to live, and would fain see good days? Keep thy tongue from evil; and thy lips, that they speak no guile* ‡‡‡. And as to the next, *If any man seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, this man's religion is vain* §§§. All liars shall have their part in the lake, which burneth with fire and brimstone ¶¶¶. And there shall in no wise enter into the new Jerusalem any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie ||||.

* John viii. 44.

† Tit. i. 2.

‡ 1 Pet. i. 15, 16.

§ Rev. iii. 14.

¶ 1 Pet. ii. 22.

|| John xviii. 37.

** Tit. ii. 14.

†† 1 Cor. v. 7, 8.

‡‡ Eph. iv. 15.

§§ Heb. x. 29.

¶¶ John xvi. 13.

|| Gal. v. 22. Eph. v. 9.

*, * James iii. 17.

††† Col. iii. 9, 10.

‡‡‡ Psal. xxxiv. 12, 13.

§§§ James i. 26.

¶¶ Rev. xxi. 8.

||| v. 27.

S E R M O N XXVII.

ON IDLE WORDS.

MATTH. xii. 36.

But I say unto you, that every idle word, that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.

OUR blessed Saviour, whenever his hearers were persons of well-disposed minds, and free from prejudices, taught them the duties of religion in the plainest terms. But length of time, and difference of language, have made some of his expressions, even on such occasions, hard to be understood, or liable to be misunderstood: and hence, unless we are both upright and considerate, may arise mistakes of great importance. For if we interpret these passages with too much indulgence to ourselves, as human nature is very prone to do, we corrupt the purity of his precepts, and endanger our own salvation: first aiming at less than we ought, then of course falling short of that. And yet the opposite extreme, of straining them too high, hath seldom done good, and often harm: hath deterred weak spirits from taking the burthen of religion upon them, entangled scrupulous tempers with endless perplexities, and made rigid ones uncharitable and superstitious: given the enemies of Christianity opportunities of declaiming against it, as unnaturally severe; and tempted the careless professors of it, after rejecting as they well might, the over strict sense of such phrases; not to take the pains of looking for any other; but go on, unrestrained by them, to live as they please.

Thus it hath happened in relation to the text of scripture, which I have just read to you. Some few, understanding by *every idle word*, every needless or trifling one; and by *giving account*, being condemned; have either forced themselves to an

an

an absurd reservedness and silence in company, or been very uneasy, that they were unable to do it; while the profane have ridiculed both them and the gospel, on that account. But the generality of mankind, soon perceiving, that this could not be the meaning of the words, have never concerned themselves to inquire what was; but have freely taken all the same liberties in discourse, as if no such warning had ever been given by our blessed Lord.

Now that he was far from the intention of laying down unfociable rules for behaviour, his whole character sufficiently shews; which was in no respect harsh and austere, but humane and conversible. The whole temper of his religion proves it yet more fully: it is an *easy yoke**; it enjoins *whatsoever things are lovely and of good report*†; it enjoins particularly, *being courteous*‡; of which being affable is a material part: and this can never consist with disapproving, as unlawful, every word that might have been spared. Discourse on subjects of little or no importance is as necessary, at times, for the relaxation of our minds, as exercise without business for the refreshment of our bodies. It is a proper exertion of that cheerfulness, which God hath plainly designed us to shew, on small occasions, as well as great. Besides, it wins and engages those, whom speechless or sententious gravity might not only displease, but prepossess against every thing good: whereas observing, even in slight matters, the apostle's rule, of *graceful speech*, (for so the best interpreters understand what is translated *speech with grace*) *seasoned with salt, that we may know how we ought to answer every man*§, both expresses and increases mutual good-will; and enables us, from being innocently entertaining, to become seriously useful. We may be sure therefore, that whatever discourse hath this general good tendency, and no bad one, be there otherwise ever so little use or significancy in it, cannot be in any blameable sense, *idle words*.

And indeed, if we look into what precedes the text, we shall find it was not occasioned by persons saying more than they needed, but other things than they ought. And therefore learned men have supposed this phrase, of *idle words*, to be one of those many, in all writers, which imply more than they express. In scripture, *unfruitful works of darkness* ¶ means per-

VOL. I.

Qq

nicious

* Matth. xi. 30.

† Phil. iv. 8.

‡ 1 Pet. iii. 8.

§ Col. iv. 6.

¶ Eph. v. 11.

nicious works : what *is unprofitable for you* *, means, what would be hurtful to you. In common speech, a worthless man is one, who, besides having no good, hath much harm in him. And thus they understand an *idle word* to be not merely an useless, but a false assertion, which is almost always, at the same time, in one way or other, an injurious one : such as evidently those were, of which our Saviour is here speaking. An interpretation, that undoubtedly removes all appearance of harshness from this part of his doctrine, and is not without support from the use of the term in old writers. Yet still, the solemn form of introduction, *But I say unto you*, seldom, if ever, used by him, when he taught only common and known truths, inclines one strongly to look for somewhat farther, than a bare declaration, that injurious and calumniating language is sinful. And, in fact, the expression, *idle words*, in the *Jewish* language, sometimes denotes all such, as make up the careless easy conversation of our leisure-time : agreeably to which, the writers in it mention them, often with contempt, or lower marks of dislike, as there is too often cause : but now and then also with a degree of praise : as when a noted commentator of theirs, who lived above 500 years ago †, explains that passage in the first psalm, *His leaf also shall not wither*, from rabbins yet older than himself, thus : that *even the idle talk*, so he expresses it, *of a good man ought to be regarded* : the most superfluous things he saith, are always of some value. And other ancient authors have the same phrase nearly in the same sense.

Our Saviour therefore probably intended here to say, that *we shall give an account, in the day of judgment*, of our most unguarded and unmeaning discourse. Not that we shall be charged with the whole of it, as criminal. God forbid ! We may as well be charged with every needless inarticulate sound, or bodily gesture ‡. The apostle speaks of persons *giving their account with joy* §. And so may we give ours, even concerning this part of our conversation, if we take care to be such as we ought. For *make the tree good* : and both *the fruit ¶* and the leaves will be so too. The full sense of the text then is, that

not

* Heb. xiii. 17.

† R. David Kimchi.

‡ And indeed the stoic doctrine was : *Digitum exere, peccas*. Pers. Sat. V. v. 119.

§ Heb. xiii. 17

¶ Matth. xii. 33.

not only our studied and deliberate, but our slighter and more negligent words, as well as actions, will, in proportion to their weight, have an influence on the future determination of our everlasting state. It appears, from what goes before, that some of the *Jews* had been maliciously ascribing the miracles or Christ to infernal powers. Others, without question, as it always happens, had thoughtlessly taken up and spread the notion, which they had heard. He therefore, after confuting the former, lets the latter also know their share of the guilt, by adding, that, on every occasion, *out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh. A good man, out of the good treasure of the heart, bringeth forth good things: and an evil man, out of the evil treasure, bringeth forth evil things.* Then he goes on: *But I say unto you, that every idle word, that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned*.*

Designed expressions, in discourse, of impiety towards God, injustice to man, disregard to virtue or decency, can proceed only from an abandoned heart. But the conversation of most persons is full of unobserved faults and bad tendencies: which, like a multitude of small expences, make us debtors beyond what we could imagine: and by continual, though slighter impressions on our morals and piety, gradually undermine what the most violent open assault could not have overturned. Each particular offence appears a trifle: some, taken alone, almost imperceptible: they disguise themselves under the shew of that chearful freedom, without which human life would be quite uncomfortable: and thus a number of enemies, entering single, form a body at length, that masters the place. Now though it may seem no great oversight to admit one or two of these; yet not to be alarmed as they increase upon us, is unpardonable want of care. Therefore, to acquaint ourselves better with the danger, and the means of guarding against it, let us consider, how common it is to speak in a very unfit manner, chiefly through inconsiderateness, of religion, moral virtue, and one another.

I. Of religion. Both prudence and good breeding, not to say, a little distrust of their own abilities and impartiality, might induce even those, who have examined its authority and

Qq 2

doubt

* Matth. xii. 34,—37.

doubt of its truth, if any such there be, still to be shy of declaring against what many others, and possibly some of equal abilities, after as full an examination, hold sacred. And yet such as have never examined in the least, nor once put a question to themselves about it, can, with a most contemptuous negligence, take for granted the falsehood of the most awful truths, and talk upon that supposition, in so assured and easy a manner, as if nobody differed from them. Whenever they do chance to hear of an argument, that seems to make for them, they applaud it, even without understanding it. But a jest they look on, as superior to all argument: and if any text of scripture can have an unfair ludicrous turn given it, or any article of faith be misrepresented into an absurdity, this they triumph in, without mercy. Now whatever excuse there may be for the doubts, or the mistakes, of inquisitive and humble minds: yet when the ignorant or thoughtless take upon them to despise the laws of heaven, without pretence for it; and make the noblest hopes of human nature, the theme of their scorn and ridicule: this is a most heinous kind of idle discourse.

But there is another sort, though not so shocking, yet more extensively mischievous: when they, who profess religion, and think they are serious in the profession, as surely, if it be a truth, it is the most serious one that can be, allow themselves inadvertently in saying what tends to its ruin: when they speak with disregard of the appointed methods of supporting it in the world: when they join in loose harangues against enthusiasm and superstition, without putting in due cautions to distinguish them from the most rational feelings of love, and marks of respect, to our Maker, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, which Christianity hath enjoined: when they, who by no means intend to be profane, repeat the profane things that others have said or done, with indulgence and pleasure: when they carry on discourse, that reflects upon doctrines, which they themselves inwardly believe; and treat duties with indifference, or even contempt, which at the same time they acknowledge, and, it may be, practise, as duties. This unmeaning compliance with fashionable talk, which they might easily avoid, yet not be remarkable; or if they were, it would be to their honour; brings them by degrees to think slightly of what they have been affecting to speak slightly of; till their piety wastes away into an empty form: and it is seldom long, before they grow ashamed

med of even that. Thus is their *mouth their destruction, and their lips the snare of their souls* *. At least they lead others into a wrong way, who are afterwards tempted to go farther; they permit themselves to be suspected; they desert the defence of religion, when it wants all possible help; and are false to their own cause. All good men therefore should be very careful, that their outward appearance do not contradict their inward faith. Doubtless there are seasons, in which pleasantry is proper: but there are subjects, on which it is never proper; and religion is one. Abruptly intruding grave maxims into the midst of mirth, without any thing to call for them, would be disgustful and absurd. But still, whatever difference of manner different occasions may require, as they certainly require a very great one; we should always continue the same in our gayest hours, that we are in our most serious; and preserve an uniformity of character throughout. Nor can there be any character more consistent or amiable, than theirs, whom dutiful regard to the greatest and best of Beings influences, not only to be just and good in their behaviour, but sometimes instructive, sometimes entertaining, always innocent, in their conversation.

This head of irreligious idle words could not have been concluded, without severe animadversions on the monstrous custom of unmeaning oaths and imprecations, if the sinfulness of it were not so notorious, and so often set before you, that I hope you can have no doubt, but such language will be a dreadful article of account in the day of judgment. Let us therefore proceed to consider,

II. What sort of usage moral virtue frequently meets with, in our familiar discourse: not from any premeditated design against it; for that belongs to another subject; but principally through inadvertency. How favourably are most of us apt to speak even of gross vices, when high rank, or superficial agreeableness, give them a false lustre: and how commonly do we treat the basest and most cruel behaviour, that men are guilty of in pursuit of their pleasure, as matter of diversion only; as no exceptions against their characters, but rather perhaps a kind of recommendation! How imperfectly sometimes is the decency of conversation preserved amongst persons of tolerably good repute: in direct contradiction to the apostle's precept,

Let

* Prov. xviii. 7.

*Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth**: and with what strange indulgence are offences of this kind usually received! How thoughtlessly do many applaud and propagate vile notions of human nature, that tend only to make it yet viler; and gratify a preposterous vanity, by representing their species worse, than it is. Concerning themselves indeed, the patrons of such opinions may, in a good measure, deserve belief. Yet even they are not quite so bad, as they absurdly endeavour to have it imagined, all mankind are! How many again will defend immoralities, of which they would by no means be guilty: and are profligate in their discourse, while they are regular in their lives! Nor doth it content us always, by our idle talk to keep wickedness in countenance: but we lay virtue under positive discouragements. Modesty and chastity, in one sex at least, with too many is a matter of great railery. Of uprightness and honesty, on some occasions, we speak with but a contemptuous kind of approbation at best. Patience and forgiveness of injuries we treat as downright mean-spiritedness; discretion in conduct, as a formal disagreeable thing; frugality as an odious one, though requisite for the purposes of justice, or made subservient to those of charity. But especially where disadvantageous peculiarities throw any thing of a shade on the truest merit; we are extremely apt to condemn and ridicule in the gross, what, however clouded, we ought to distinguish, and mention with due honour. A little ungracefulness of behaviour, or meanness of appearance, or defect in point of abilities, or ignorance of the world, though accompanied with a worthy heart, shall provoke a harder censure from us, than a mischievous turn of mind, or a vicious course of behaviour: nay we can fancy circumstances, when we find none, to render good qualities despicable. Then while we thus depreciate real virtues, we exalt imaginary ones into their places: false honour, false good-nature; which lead often to the worst of crimes, and disguise them under the best of names. In short, the conversation, even of those who are counted virtuous, by others and themselves, goes a great deal too much, without their attending to it, on maxims directly contrary to the principles which they avow: and places both the conduct and enjoyment of life upon a wrong footing. For instance: are we not perpetually speaking of this present world, as if it were our all: nay, of the out-ward

* Eph. iv. 29.

ward shew of things here, as if it were the true and only happiness of man? What impression must this make, by degrees, on the minds of those who hear us: indeed on our own? By thoughtlessly talking thus upon mistaken suppositions, we shall come at length to forget they are such; and act at least like those, who think them true. But let us now consider,

III. How wrongly we treat each other, in our careless easy discourse; not from deliberate ill will, but by way of amusement.

One raises an idle story, to divert the company, at the expence of a person, who, it may be, hath not given the least ground for it. A second catches what he hears; perhaps believes it too hastily; perhaps doth not believe it, but tells it notwithstanding: a third fills it up with plausible circumstances: the general voice repeats it: and then, what every one says, passes for certain: especially if the composition be seasoned with a small spice of wit, it is universally relished, and lasts for a long time. But, if besides, it lessens an honourable character; instead of doubting, or being sorry, people echo it with immoderate joy: and yet every one thinks himself clear of all blame, because he means only entertainment. Possibly he did: and yet, as neither he, nor they that heard him, would have been near so much entertained with a good report, as an ill one; there is almost always at the bottom of this practice, a latent malignity of heart against our fellow-creatures; *our brethren, for whom Christ died**, and whom both nature and religion command us to love. But whatever the principle be, the effects are very bad. Unthinking licentiousness of speech, concerning persons of high rank, may endanger even a nation's peace. And yet what numbers are there, that will venture to assert, without the least diffidence, whatever suits their humour, on matters, which perhaps they know nothing of: and when once they are got into the road of talk, quicken their pace, without perceiving it; and will go any length, to keep one another company: so that, to use the terms of scripture, *the beginning of the words of their mouth is foolishness: and the end, mischievous madness*†. But in private life, no one can tell, what unhappy consequences a false report to the disadvantage of another, though seemingly in a trifle, may have. Or if it were a true report; let us ask ourselves, how could our tempers, how indeed would our characters bear, that

* Rom. xiv. 15.

† Eccl. x. 13.

that every thing, which is true of us, should be spread abroad? And were the person, who had done it, to say in his own defence, that he had no design of hurting us; when however he had no regard, whether he hurt us or not; would this appear a sufficient plea? The harm done is not the less, often the greater, for the negligent manner it is done in. That procures belief: whereas apparent malice, or passion, would render what we say suspected. Besides, anger is frequently founded on provocations, that a little excuse the injuries it doth: but indolently treading under foot the reputations of others, is wanton cruelty; that with the gayest indifference delivers persons over to reproach or contempt, it may be for life, rather than an ill-natured story, or a lucky turn of words, shall be lost; that puts the good name of another, on which his all may depend, into the balance, and lets the love of talk, the vanity of having early intelligence, or any other silly fancy, outweigh it. Every one should strive indeed to make such conversation harmless, by expressing a disregard and dislike to it. But, as this will never be done effectually; so, if it were, the guilt of these charitable communicators would be much the same; for they certainly did not design to be thus insignificant.

There is yet another, and frequently a more fatal way still, of injuring others by unmeaning discourse: when, merely to enliven the present hour, we give them, with false civility, a higher opinion of their own accomplishments, or our esteem of them, or good intentions towards them, than we ought. Many ridiculous mistakes, and many serious inconveniences, are men thus drawn into: they lose the little knowledge they had of themselves; affect what misbecomes them, attempt what they are unequal to; and take wrong steps in life, that always expose, and often ruin them: to the great diversion, sometimes, of those, who should be otherwise moved at seeing the mischief to which they have contributed.

These instances, without seeking for more, abundantly shew the need of watching over our freest and easiest conversation, and the justice of its undergoing God's final censure. *Lo, there is not a word in my tongue, but thou, O Lord, knowest it altogether* *. And whatever he observes, whether good or bad in us, the righteous judge of the whole earth will accordingly reward or punish. Perhaps we may not particularly foresee the harm we do by our irreligious, immoral, or injurious idle

words:

* Pf. cxxxix. 3.

words: but we cannot help foreseeing, that not a little may arise from them: and it must be, in general, a wrong turn of mind, that prompts us to them. For as *the fruit declareth if the tree have been dressed; so is the utterance of a conceit in the heart of man* *. It is very true, that the government of the tongue at all times is a matter of great difficulty: and *if any one offend not in word, the same is a perfect man* †, indeed. But still we might offend much less than we do, and approach much nearer to this perfection, would we but often recollect, *that for these things also God will bring us into judgment* ‡: a consideration, that should make us, like the psalmist, *keep our mouth, as it were with a bridle* §.

Possibly it may be objected, that such attention as this would embarrass conversation with endless restraints, which will make it quite disagreeable: and the awe of religion in our cheerful moments, damp the whole pleasure of society. Nor can it be denied, that observing rules in their discourse, would, to some persons, for some time, be a grievous task. But so it is in every thing that we undertake to learn, especially if we have learnt wrong before: and yet we shall never learn to good purpose, without observing rules: and the closer pains we take at first, the more graceful and easier figure we shall make afterwards, in performances of any kind. Men of understanding and application may soon qualify themselves to be very entertaining on harmless and useful subjects: and consequently running into others must imply, either low abilities, or bad dispositions, or criminal thoughtlessness. But if conversation doth lose, by due regulations, a little of its poignancy; it loses its venom too: and surely the delight of hearing, or saying, improper lively things, may well be given up, to avoid the exquisite uneasiness they sometimes cause, and the various ill effects they generally have. As for the awe of religion: were it in our choice, whether there should be an inspector of our actions and words and thoughts, or not; it might deserve consideration, what influence on the comfort of our beings that inspection would have. But since we know there is one, under whose eye we live continually; our only concern is to suit our behaviour to this our condition, be it more pleasing, or be it less. Not that in reality there could be a happier, than subjection to

VOL. I.

R r

his

* Eccclus. xxvii. 6.

† Eccl. xi. 9.

‡ James iii. 2.

§ Ps. xxxix. 2.

his fatherly care, who considers our frame, and *knoweth whereof we are made**: who hath given us every principle of joy and delight, that belongs to our nature; and approves of the innocent use of them all. But then the most indulgent superior, that will preserve himself a superior, as God assuredly will, must require so much regard to his presence, as shall restrain us, not only from wilful and flagrant offences, but from that supine negligence, which, though it be shewn in lesser instances only, yet, by the incessant repetition of them, argues great disregard: such, that, were we to consider ourselves only as God's creatures, we should be obliged to avoid conscientiously. But if we consider ourselves as fallen, sinful, redeemed creatures, redeemed by the love of him, whom *if we love we must keep his commandments*†, and whose wrath we shall not *escape, if we neglect so great salvation*‡, here will be additional motives of the strongest sort, not only to *set a watch before our mouths, and keep the door of our lips*§, but to *purify our hearts*||, through faith in him: and when we have thus, for there is no other way, *healed the fountain, then it will send forth sweet water*¶: then, if the sense of our obligations, and our danger, in this respect, should, as it will, by representing conversation in a different light, from what we had seen it in before, moderate our fondness for it; lessen the time we spend in it, and the share we take to ourselves of it; make us cautious of saying more than hath at least a general good tendency, and careful to a greater degree, in proportion as we are obliged to live more in company, and as our discourse will be more regarded there: we shall plainly perceive, that no manner of harm follows, but more good than a little, by the leisure we thus gain for serious thought, valuable books, and requisite employments of several kinds. A more thorough acquaintance, in retirement, with ourselves and our duty, our own affairs and useful knowledge, will send us back into company, from time to time, greatly improved, both in proper subjects of discourse, and proper cautions for speaking of them in such a manner, as to be at once agreeable, innocent, and instructive. Thus prepared by the cool reflections of solitude, we might enjoy the full pleasure of society, without any remorse ensuing: and turn that part of our lives, in which too commonly our best inclinations

* Ps. ciii. 14.

† John xiv. 15.

‡ Heb. ii. 3.

§ Ps. cxli. 3.

|| Acts xv. 9.

¶ 2 Kings ii. 21. James iii. 11.

inclinations wither away, and many bad ones take deep root, into a continual exercise of benefiting our fellow-creatures, and advancing ourselves in the favour of our Maker. For, to any one thus disposed, numberless opportunities would occur, at such times, of *communication, which is good to the use of edifying and ministering grace unto the hearers* * : opportunities of making religion and morals look chearful and amiable ; of insinuating seasonable advice ; of softening rugged tempers ; of confirming right resolutions, and putting wrong behaviour out of countenance. And in proportion as the natural or acquired abilities of men are greater, or their rank secures to them more regard, the more extensively serviceable they may be in this way. But where all these advantages meet together in an eminent degree, it is inexpressible, what blessings to mankind they, who enjoy them, might be, would they but use them well. For then, not only the busier part of their time would be spent in promoting piety and virtue, prudence and happiness ; but their most disengaged and freest hours become seasons of delightful improvement to all about them : in which, imitating the kindly influences of heaven, *their doctrine would drop as the rain, their speech distil as the dew : as the small rain upon the tender herb, and as the showers upon the grass* †.

* Eph. iv. 29.

† Deut. xxxii. 2.

S E R M O N XXVIII.

ON ANGER.

EPHESIANS iv. 26.

Be ye angry, and sin not.

THE nature of Almighty God being absolutely perfect and uncompounded, neither passions nor affections, properly so called, have any place in it: but his actions all proceed from uniform and unmixed regard to truth and equity. His creatures, incapable of attaining to be in any respect what he is, fall short of it in different degrees, from those spirits above, that approach nearest to pure intelligence, though infinitely distant from it, to the lowest inhabitants of earth, which have no other guide than appetites and instincts. Man is of a middle rank; and partakes, almost equally, of inferior principles to excite and move him, where reason would be insufficient, and of reason to direct and restrain these, where else they would take a wrong course, or exceed proper bounds. Our proportion therefore of lower faculties, though a proof that we are very imperfect, contributes to our being on the whole less so, than we should have been; and a due regulation of them by the higher, will make us continually more perfect than we are. This is the great employment allotted us by our Maker here on earth: which indeed we often find much pain in attempting, but should suffer much greater by neglecting, and shall be rewarded eternally for performing.

Now, according to the several kinds of our inward dispositions, the moral discipline of them varies. Some, as the benevolent sort, require chiefly to be strengthened: some again, as the irascible, to be kept in subjection. And indeed our anger is so hard to be governed, and the cause of such dreadful evils, when it is not governed; that no wonder, if great and wise men

men have seemed to speak of it, as totally and essentially vicious; as requiring to be, not only moderated but rooted out. Yet, as those parts of the outward frame of nature, which have produced at any time the most frightful effects, appear notwithstanding, on due inquiry, beneficial constituents of that whole, which the Creator originally pronounced to be good: let us not condemn, without reserve, this part of our inward frame; which he hath planted in our breasts, otherwise it had never existed there; and which, in condescension to our understandings, he hath ascribed to himself.

Resentment is, in its primitive nature, a just and generous movement of the mind, expressing that displeasure against ill actions, which they deserve: and, in our hearts at least, such disapprobation of what is wrong seems inseparably connected with approving what is right. From this principle, applied to ourselves, we feel a scorn of baseness and vice, that prompts us to reject it with disdain, when we are tempted to it: or a consequent self-dislike, if we have fallen under the temptation, which doth not easily allow us any rest, till we have returned to our duty. The same principle, pointed towards our fellow-creatures, deters them from enterprising wickedness, and invigorates us to resist it: or, if it be already committed, stirs us up to set before them the offensiveness of their conduct in so strong a light, as may induce them to reform it. And thus anger, though it designs to give uneasiness, is so very different from hatred, as to be often the best proof of love. But when just indignation cannot amend the faulty, then it comes in properly to punish them: to counterbalance that excessive tenderness, to which, however amiable, it would in some cases be a fatal weakness to yield, and support us in the painful work of *executing wrath on him that doth evil* *.

Thus useful and important is this passion: by which our Saviour himself was occasionally moved, as when he *was much displeased* with his disciples †, and *looked round about on the Jews with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts* ‡. He hath declared indeed, *that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause, shall be in danger of the judgment* §: but that very limitation implies, that there are causes, for which we

* Rom. xiii. 4.

† Mark x. 14.

‡ Mark iii. 5.

§ Matth. v. 22.

we may *do well to be angry* *. Or even were his threatening originally unlimited, as in some copies it is; yet the reason of the case, his own example, and other texts of scripture, oblige us to understand him only of the unjust kinds of anger: which are so much commoner than the allowable, that they have almost appropriated the name, and turned it to an ill meaning. Whence perhaps it is, that the stoic philosophers condemn this passion in the most general terms †, while yet they not only allow it to be useful to those, in whom reason singly hath not sufficient force ‡, but expressly tolerate, in their ideal perfectly wise man, such gentler commotions of mind, and resemblances of anger, as are in reality moderate degrees of it §. And, (which deserves much greater attention), St. Paul, who within a few verses of the text hath commanded *all wrath and anger to be put away from* ¶ Christians, gives, notwithstanding, the permissive direction in it, *Be ye angry and sin not*.

The result then must be, that this passion is indeed a lawful one; but very necessary, and very hard, to be kept within due bounds; which considerations recommend the following method in discoursing upon it.

I. To describe the due bounds, with the common excesses of anger.

II. To dissuade from such excesses.

III. To direct how they may be avoided.

I. To describe the due bounds, with the common excesses of anger.

Now the proper bound for all passion, is reason. And we are then only moved by our affections as we ought, when they excite us to what our understandings on reflection approve.

But

* Jonah iv. 9.

† Thus Cicero, who professes in his offices, l. i. c. 2. chiefly to follow the Stoics, blames the Peripatetics, c. 25. for praising anger, as given us by nature for our good, and saith it is to be avoided in all cases. But he is speaking only concerning cases of punishment. However, he forbids it also in reproofs, c. 38.

‡ Utile est eum uti motu animi, qui uti ratione non potest, Cic. Tusc. disp. l. 4. § 25. Ed. Davies.

§ Sentiet (sapiens) levem quendam tenuemque motum—umbras affectuum. Sen. de Ira. l. i. c. xvi. p. 13. Ed. Lips. Vid. et. l. 2.

¶ V. 31.

But because a rule so general is not sufficiently instructive, I shall enlarge on the several particulars comprehended under it, which are specified by the philosopher, in his *ethics*, thus, that *He, who is angry, only on such occasions as he ought, and with such persons as he ought, and in such manner, and at such time, and for such continuance, as he ought, deserves praise in the exercise of this passion* *.

1. On such occasions as he ought. What these are, hath already in some measure appeared. Were they, with whom we have to do, constantly virtuous and wise, there would be no occasion. But now their transgressions against God, our fellow-creatures, and ourselves, furnish, alas, but too many. When our Maker, whom we ought to reverence and love with our whole souls, is dishonoured; when his laws and the sanctions of them (the ground-work of all security and all comfort) are insulted; surely it is cause not only of grief, but indignation. When the helpless are oppressed, the well-meaning circumvented, innocence aspersed or seduced, faith broken, kindness requitted with ill usage, or public good sacrificed to private views, we both may, and must (if we have any sympathy with our kind) feel our spirit rise in their behalf. And though we can neither interpose to assist all that suffer, nor permit our tempers to be ruffled as often as injustice is committed upon earth; yet in all proper ways we ought to shew, that we strongly dislike all such things: and it is an ill sign, when persons are indifferent in the cases of others, and will stand up for no one's interests, but their own.

Wrongs done to ourselves we are all so apt to resent, at least enough, that it may seem needless, and even dangerous, to say any thing of these, as one lawful occasion for anger. But the truth must be acknowledged, that this passion being given us, in great measure, for our own defence, we may innocently exert a competent degree of it for that purpose. Nor can we help, generally speaking, being a little more moved at our own injuries and sufferings, than those of others; because we cannot but have a livelier sense of them; and the emotion of mind, which proceeds from that sense, must bear some proportion to it.

One thing more to be observed is, that though faults are the
only

* Aristot. Eth. Nicom. l. iv. c. 5.

only just ground of resentment; and the greater they are, the more the ground: yet, when they do not amount to crimes, but are only neglects or transgressions of some smaller obligation; still, since a great deal of inconvenience in life arises, even from these instances of wrong behaviour; they warrant and require such lower marks of our displeasure, especially when the culpable are placed under our inspection, as may be requisite for their amendment.

And now it might well be hoped, that a sufficient latitude was given to this necessary evil, the exercise of anger. But these are narrow bounds for a passion, which, if let loose, will admit of none. We can be angry with persons, not only for their faults, but their good qualities and accomplishments, when they excel, or come too near, us or our favourites: not only for doing amiss, but for doing their duty, if it interfere with any of our designs or humours. Nay, we can be angry with them for having done their duty to us: done the kindest thing they could for us, reminded us of our failings, though in a friendly way; or shewn themselves in any instance more concerned for us, than we are for ourselves. We can be angry with persons, even when they have done us kindnesses; for not doing us such great ones, or not so soon, or not in such a manner, as we would have had them: though perhaps they were not bound to do us any. And we can be extremely angry with them for having any degree of regard to their own interests, when ours are concerned: first looking upon ourselves as all the world, and the rest of mankind as nothing; then fired with the utmost indignation, that this should be disputed.

But in lesser matters, we can be angry with men even for their natural tempers, when they happen to be more gravely, or more chearfully, or any way differently, turned from our own: for their not liking the same employments or amusements, their not falling into the same opinions and ways of thinking, sometimes on the most trifling subjects; nay, for not perceiving and acknowledging immediately the strength of an argument, or the weight of an authority.

Again, we can be angry for the unkind words or actions, to which we ourselves have given the provocation: and will make no allowances for little unreasonableness in others, where we have, perhaps by great ones, set the pattern, and thrown

thrown the temptation in their way. We can be angry at those who are employed by us, for mistaking or not succeeding in cases, where they have done as well as ever they could, and certainly did not contrive to be ignorant or fail on purpose to vex us. We can be angry at them for mere accidental misfortunes in our affairs: Things, which were not provided against, because they were not to be expected; or which a reasonable degree of care proved insufficient to provide against; or, it may be, which all the care in the world could not have prevented. Nay, in our idlest diversions, we can be as vehemently discomposed, as about the most important business. And, in the general course of our behaviour, we can be impatient about every thing, if we have been made uneasy about any thing: and quite out of humour, perhaps for a considerable time together, without either having, or almost thinking we have any manner of provocation to it. Indeed something of this, in too many, seems constitutional: and, so far as it is, ought to have allowances made for it by every one, except those who are liable to it. But they themselves cannot reflect too seriously, how often and how much they make all about them suffer for no cause at all; and those most, whom they ought least: how strangely and wildly unreasonable they are, when under the power of this bad spirit: and how firmly they are obliged to watch against it continually, and free themselves, when seized by it, as soon as possibly they can.

In all these instances, anger is so evidently unjust, that happily no pretence can be made for indulging it. But there are others, in which, faults having been really committed, a plea for resenting is really furnished; and yet, if we resolve to act rightly and wisely, no resentment at all must be shewn or entertained. We have not been received perhaps with the good breeding, or treated with the regard or good humour that we might expect: Expressions, not so prudent or obliging, have dropt from persons in relation to us: Things, in which we meant no harm, have been taken wrong: Our desires and inclinations have not been consulted, when they ought: Our opinion or recommendation hath been too little attended to: Our advice or directions too little observed: or some one or another of a thousand matters of this sort hath happened. And doubtless every one of them, supposing the fact to have been as we imagine, is a fault: and, though of a

slighter fort, should be carefully avoided by those, with whom we live; and, let me add, by ourselves too. But alas, they with whom we live, and we ourselves too, are creatures, naturally subject to such faults. Indiscretions and thoughtlessness, odd humours and perverseness, little partialities and prejudices, ever were and will be amongst men, even the better kind of men. And therefore what can be done? Either we must all give and take offence almost every hour of our lives; or we must be content to make mutual allowances, and put good constructions on things: wink at what had better not be seen; forget as soon as possible, what we could not help seeing; and teach those by our example, who, we think, have need to learn, friendly dispositions, and respectful behaviour. This is the only way of mending matters: and shameful as it is to our species, half the uneasinesses, that we feel in life, proceed from our not taking it.

2. The next part of the rule before mentioned is, that we be angry only with such persons as we ought.

And here immediately occurs a criminal use of this passion, almost too shocking to mention: I mean, when we are angry with our Maker. For against whom else is it, that our displeasure is pointed, when we murmur at the distribution of things here, either because our own condition is less agreeable than we would have it, or that of others more prosperous, than we imagine they deserve? The former is direct rebellion of the heart against the dispositions of infinite wisdom and goodness: an arrogance, which in creatures otherwise innocent would be monstrous; and how much more so in miserable sinners! The latter indeed would appear a virtuous concern at the encouragement, which frequent success gives to wickedness and unworthiness. Nor can it be doubted, but we have cause, often to be sorry, and sometimes to be angry, with those around us, when this happens through their fault. And yet indulging either of these dispositions too far, will reduce us to a very uncomfortable and very blameable state of mind. But to be provoked, that God suffers men to act thus, is claiming to govern the world in his stead: whose abhorrence of sin, and of disproportion, we ought to consider, is infinitely greater than ours can be: and therefore if, for good and wise reasons he thinks fit to bear with it, well may we do so too; and wait with patience for the appointed time, when every
seeming

seeming irregularity shall appear to have joined in producing the most beautiful order. *Fret not thyself because of the ungodly, neither be thou envious against the evil-doers. Leave off from wrath, and let go displeasure : else shalt thou be moved to do evil. Hold thee still in the Lord, and abide patiently upon him* *. *For surely there is an end, and thine expectation shall not be cut off* †.

But as anger against our Maker is impious, against some of our fellow-creatures also it is highly improper : those particularly, under whose authority we are ; and all, in some measure, whose rank is higher than our own. Of them, beyond others, we ought not without strong reasons even to think ill, much less to blame them openly, and least of all to their faces. But if some extraordinary occasion should happen to require it, their station absolutely demands, that we suppress much of that roughness of manner, and familiar warmth of expostulation, which perhaps towards equals might not be unfit. For he, who is angry and finds fault, assumes a kind of superiority for the time : which inferiors ought rarely to do, and with great moderation, if at all ; though doubtless in gentler terms, they may freely represent whatever concerns them.

Another sort of persons, exempted from all heat of resentment, and therefore certainly of reproof, are our benefactors and our friends. Where we have received favours, it would be very hard to let a few unkindnesses, because they came last, blot out every thing that went before ; and move us to speak or think with the same severity, as we would of others. Nothing, but gross and repeated provocations, ought to have this effect. And we should be extremely backward to imagine, that they, whom we have seen taking pleasure to do us good, design us any harm. Then as to our friends : the esteem, which we have entertained for them, surely must be founded on merit sufficient to shelter a number of lesser faults from angry notice. Friendship implies a tacit covenant of mutual forbearance : without which it would be in danger of breaking every day. It permits indeed, and sometimes requires, remonstrances to be made : but never without some weighty cause ; and always with such gentleness, and evident proofs of cordial good will, as may, if possible, draw closer those bonds,

S f 2

which

* Psal. xxxvii. 1, 8, 7.

† Prov. xxiii. 18.

which nothing but the last necessity should untie. And even then, having once been friends is a powerful reason, both of prudence and conscience, to restrain us from ever becoming enemies.

Others are privileged against our anger upon any particular misbehaviour, by the general goodness of their character and conduct. We are all so far from perfection, that whoever intends, and acts right in the main, merits an esteem for it, that should cover a multitude of smaller offences, or however greatly moderate our displeasure at them. And indeed, shewing worthy persons, in the mildest way, that they have done amiss, will give them a concern, that needs no aggravation.

But many, who are more liable to faults, must yet, on account of their natural dispositions be tenderly used. Some cannot support any harshness of treatment, but sink under it immediately. Some again, anger, though not excessive, serves only to exasperate. They will readily enough yield to calm, soft representations: but are impatient of rebuke. To such therefore we should condescend a little: and think it sufficient amends, that we are almost sure of prevailing on them by such means, as (if we have any good nature), will be far the most agreeable to ourselves. But there are likewise, it must be owned, people in the world, whom it is easy to make worse by rough usage, and not easy to make better by any other. That these deserve to have their tempers much consulted, cannot be said. But still, partly from charity, and partly from discretion, we must treat them in the method, by which they are likeliest to prove tractable: and, resolving first, to have as little to do with them as we can; endeavour to get over what we must have to do with them, as quietly as we are able.

There is also a great variety, not only in tempers, but in understandings and abilities, which ought to be considered on this occasion. We pass by many faults in children without anger, if we are at all considerate: because they know not, as yet, the rules of behaviour; or, through the levity, incident to their age, are turned aside from recollecting them. Now, for the same reason, such of riper years, as either by nature have less readiness, or accuracy, or sedateness; or, from their education less acquaintance with propriety, or the customs of the world, should in proportion be exempted from blame, when they misbehave; especially in small points, and such as are beyond

yond their reach, or out of their way. Besides, men cannot be always attentive to every part of what they do know. And some have constitutionally so uncommon a share of thoughtlessness, that, with the same, nay, much more desire and pains, than others, to be exact and punctual, they appear to be singularly negligent. These evidently need compassion: and severity to them would be barbarous. Now and then indeed a little chiding may be necessary for the cure of their infirmity; but it ought never to be more than is necessary, and always intermixed with expressions of encouragement.

Thus you have seen, who are the least fit objects of our displeasure: after which it will be useful to specify, who are the most fit; and may allowably have much greater liberties taken with them by us, than commonly are. I mean ourselves: of whom we probably know full as great misdemeanors, and from whom we have certainly received much greater injuries, than from any one else; over whom also we have the largest authority, and are the most indispensably bound to exercise it. Yet even here it is possible to be guilty of excess. For anger must aim at good, when directed against ourselves, no less than if it were against any other person: and is always faulty, when it tends to our harm; even were it no further harm, than discomposing us beyond reason. And some want to be cautioned in the strongest manner, at times, to beware of immoderate self-dislike, because it may urge them to the rashest and most fatal extremities. But self-indulgence is infinitely the commoner failing: and therefore the general rule must ever be to preach up due rigour in this case; for due tenderness will seldom be forgotten. Here then we may well employ that superfluous warmth of spirit, which we are apt to turn quite another way; and shall never employ it better, than to correct its own exorbitances: that, so spending our displeasure upon our own unjust vehemence, we may *put on* towards all our brethren, (and every human creature is such,) *bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another,—even as Christ hath forgiven us:—and let the peace of God rule in our hearts, to the which we are also called in one body* *.

* Col. iii. 12, 13, 15.

S E R M O N X X I X .

ON ANGER.

EPHESIANS iv. 26.

Be ye angry, and sin not.

I N a former discourse on these words, after proving that anger is a lawful passion, but a very dangerous one, I proposed,

- I. To describe its due bounds, with the common excesses of it.
- II. To dissuade from such excesses.
- III. To direct how they may be avoided.

Now in general the bounds of every passion are those, which reason, sufficiently enlightened, prescribes. And the particular bounds, which it prescribes to this passion, are, as I have already observed, well enumerated in the philosopher's rule: that *he who is angry, only on such occasions, and with such persons, and in such manner, and at such time, and for such continuance, as he ought, deserves praise in the exercise of this faculty.* On the two first of these heads, therefore, the occasions and objects of our anger, I have already enlarged: and, as the proper ones will be almost sure to be remembered, and the improper ones are much too many to be specified again, I shall proceed, without any repetition of either, to the following part of the rule, which is

III. That we be angry only in such manner as we ought. This comprehends both the degree to which our displeasure may allowably rise, and the instances in which it may be fitly expressed.

There is a possibility of being less angry than we should. Our sense of wrong actions may be too faint: and by taking, in consequence of this, but a slight notice of them, we may confirm

confirm the faulty in a bad course, instead of deterring them from it. And especially, when their faults do us no harm, whatever they may do to others or themselves, we are often very backward either to express or feel any resentment, even where it is our peculiar duty. But if, while they injure others, they serve us; far from being displeased, we are very apt to defend and encourage them. Yet there are some in the world, whom a generous ardor of mind occasionally discomposes too much, on seeing injustice done to their fellow-creatures. But these are rare. It is in our own cases usually, that we are inclined to excess: and in them our danger is very great. To avoid it therefore, we should, all of us, frequently reflect, that our passions being only given us for auxiliaries to supply the imperfection of our higher principles; if they move us enough to set us upon acting right, it suffices; and if they move us more than is requisite for that end, it will commonly be too much. Where we properly can, the very appearance of displeasure should be avoided: for, though it be a method of cure, yet, being a disagreeable one, if we have recourse to it without need, we treat our patient ill. And, even where we must shew ourselves offended, this may very well be done, indeed best of all, without allowing ourselves to be inwardly disturbed. For thus, at the same time that we preserve a due authority over those with whom we are concerned, we shall keep our own temper in a state of tranquillity, and fit for whatever lies before us. In matters of moment, it is not always in our power to be absolutely calm: but this consideration should increase our care not to be agitated too much. For he who is angry more than he hath cause, is so far *angry without a cause*. And therefore we must have regard, both to the proportion of the fault, and our right to take notice of it. For a person may deserve a great deal of anger, and yet deserve little or none from us.

Exact determinations indeed of this proportion are hard to give; and probably would do harm if they could easily be given. For, were the limits of lawful anger in every case precisely known, most people would venture without scruple to the utmost extent of them; and so of course be hurried beyond them: whereas the difficulty of discerning exactly where the transgression begins, is a strong caution to stop at a safe distance from it. But instead of thinking thus, we commonly
conclude,

conclude, that since anger may justly rise according to the provocation, and much of it is daily shewn about small things, any degree whatever is defensible in great ones. Now evidently this reasoning ought to be inverted as follows: only a moderate resentment being permitted us, where the offence is ever so heinous, hardly the slightest ought to be expressed, where it is but little.

And though we cannot ascertain minutely the due quantity in each, the observation of two rules will secure us from any important error: never to lose the government of ourselves, or do an injury to any one else. The first of these directions is fundamental. For if once reason be dethroned, rules and bounds are nothing. And though it be a dreadful evil to let any passion seduce us from obeying that principle, which God hath authorized to regulate our whole conduct, yet it is peculiarly dangerous to follow this blindfold: which precipitates men instantaneously, and without leaving room for a moment's reflection, into the extremities of mischief to others and themselves; and even where it is not hurtful, is however singularly disagreeable and unbecoming. We must therefore attentively remember, that, though displeasure may be allowable, rage cannot: and accordingly forbear, not only all acts of violence or insult, but all vehement gestures, all noisy and unreasonable talk, and above the rest, that shocking, though common method of venting fury, by oaths and imprecations: invoking the notice of God in a condition when we ought to dread it; and bringing down that wrath on our own heads, which we vainly and wickedly call for upon others.

But avoiding these extravagances is not all: is nothing indeed, if, under a calmer appearance, we permit our resentment to go undue lengths. It is true, anger can be useful to others only by giving them uneasiness: but often a plain and grave signification, that we dislike their behaviour, will give it sufficiently: and then to add cutting, though guarded, words, is cruel. Sometimes the same person, having both blameable and valuable qualities, nay exerting both together, may deserve that reproof should be tempered with praise. And where but little forbearance hath been merited, prudence frequently requires much to be exercised: because it may soften and win over those, whom roughness would drive to desperation.

And

And, if we ought thus to moderate the just expressions of our displeasure: much more ought unjust ones to be utterly forborn. We must by no means think, that every trifling, or perhaps imaginary, provocation gives us a liberty, which the very greatest do not, of betraying secrets, throwing random aspersions, and saying in the peevish fit whatever it suggests. Men do not lose all the rights of human nature immediately, because they have chanced to offend us. Their fault in doing so may be considerable, or may be small: but this one crime cannot transform them into quite different creatures from what they were before: it can never intitle us to speak falsehoods of them: and very seldom, to say prejudicial truths. Injurious words may seem a slight matter to those who utter them; especially if they are such, as the world calls decent: but the person, to whom they relate, experiences them to be heavy and bitter things: and what his feelings must be, is the point, that we should have in view, reflecting what our own would be in the like case.

However, the guilt of anger is yet more aggravated, when it misguides our actions, as well as our tongues. If it prompts us only to withhold from others, without cause, those kindnesses and favours, to which they had some equitable claim, or, which, though they had not, we had hitherto shewn them, or intended for them; this alone is very hard and wrong usage. Indeed who almost could be secure even of a day's continuance of friendship, if every thing, which it were possible to take amiss, might put an end to it? But, if wrath push us on to do harm instead of good, then it hath arrived at its height of injustice. Not but we may lawfully in some cases inflict punishment on those who have given us offence. But then anger is not to be the prosecutor: much less to pass or execute the sentence. It is not so often, as we are justly displeased with any one, that he is to suffer: but then only, when a valuable purpose requires it. Now we are by no means qualified to determine that point, while our inward disturbance is vehement: nor should we ever allow ourselves to act, before we are cool enough to judge: nor are we always cool enough, when we think we are. And therefore we should learn to suspect our tempers, have regard to the opinion of the unprejudiced, and lean to the moderate side, when there is any doubt which is right. It will comparatively seldom happen, that excess of mildness will do any great mischief: but the

contrary extreme causes an incredible deal perpetually. Every day we see those, who are possessed by this evil spirit, return monstrous acts of injustice for slight instances of neglect or unfriendliness; imagine their displeasure, whencesoever it arises, a justification for stirring up all the world against the object of it; and look upon themselves as ill used, if every one else will not be as unreasonable, as they are.

But I go on the next branch of the rule, which is,

IV. That we be angry only at such times, as we ought.

And therefore it immediately occurs, never till we are sure, that the thing, which offends us, is really done, and really a matter to take offence at. *Blame not, before thou hast examined the truth: understand first, and then rebuke* *. Some are eternally suspecting, and finding fault at all adventures: as if they felt a delight in the imagination of things being amiss. These, even when there happens to be foundation for their censures, are in the wrong notwithstanding; for it is more than they knew beforehand: but, when it proves, as it often will, that all their ill humour was groundless; this is very shameful to themselves, and very injurious to others; hardens them, instead of having any good effect upon them; and brings them at last to think it the better way, since they must be blamed, to be blamed for something. But suppose there be an appearance of reason to chide: yet appearances are deceitful; and passion spreads a mist before our understandings, which keeps us from seeing any thing exactly, and makes every thing look bigger than it is. No one therefore should express, or even inwardly indulge, the least warmth, till he hath first considered the case, as calmly as he can; and then, if there be room for it, hath given the parties, whom he suspects, liberty and time to make their defence; attending to it with a sincere desire of finding them innocent; making no determination, till he hath searched the matter fully; and being, in obedience to St. James's direction, *swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath* †. The passionate person is just the reverse of this: impatient of all attempts to set him right; resolute to have that true, which he hath once imagined; eager to pass and execute immediate judgment. It may therefore be of the utmost consequence to get, though it were only a little space, for cool reflection. There is very small danger but that even after it we shall be
angry

* Ecclus. xi. 7.

† James i. 19.

angry enough, if we have cause: and there is great danger, that without it we may be angry, though we have no cause; or at least much more angry, than we have any shadow of cause.

But admitting it to be seasonable for us to conceive the indignation, that we do: yet several things may render the present time improper to vent it. We may be likely just then to exceed due bounds: at least it may discompose us too much; and perhaps unfit us for duties or employments, to which we are immediately called: it may give uneasiness, or shew disrespect, to the company we are in, whom we should never unnecessarily trouble with our vexations: or it may have a wrong effect on the object of our displeasure. If he be under the more than ordinary influence of some vehement passion, or his reason be any other way disturbed or clouded; if some prejudice, which cannot be removed instantly, makes him deaf in the mean while to all, that we can say; if his temper be not now serious enough to mind reproof, or the circumstances of time or place or company be such, that he will resent it as an indignity: *the discretion of a man should defer his anger* *, how eager soever it may be to burst forth. But we are still more firmly bound to restrain ourselves, when the faulty have suffered by their faults, and want consolation instead of rebuke. Resentment was planted in us to discourage or withstand the injurious, not to insult the miserable: to give people a lively sense of their misbehaviour; not to triumph over them, when they have that sense already; perhaps more of it, than they can well bear. Or, though they feel their folly but imperfectly, yet if the consequences of it be heavy upon them; either casting them off, or severely reproaching them, at such times, is very ungenerous: and kind forbearance, one would imagine, cannot fail to make the good impressions on them, that we wish. If indeed they still remain void of reflection on their conduct, and it be our province to awaken them, we must attempt it but as gently as the case will permit; and perhaps, not till having done whatever we properly can towards relieving their distresses, we thus acquire an indisputable right of laying before them, with some warmth of expostulation, their past errors, in order to prevent the future.

The concluding part of the rule under consideration is,

T t 2

V. That

* Prov. xix. 11.

V. That we be angry only so long as we ought.

It is possible indeed, though very uncommon, that men may lay aside their displeasure, at least the appearance of it, too soon; before it hath produced its intended effect: and, giving more credit, than they have cause, to a few fair promises, take little notice, how they are performed. Thus every one around them finds out the way of dealing with them: and perceiving, on how easy terms all may be made up, transgresses without fear. Sometimes the very same person is in the first moments much too violent, and afterwards, possibly from a consciousness of that, as much too remiss: and so is blameable and despised on both accounts. But the opposite extreme is the ordinary one: and generally the worst sin, that accompanies this passion. Some excess of sudden anger is to many a frailty scarce avoidable. For it is exceedingly difficult to escape being carried a little too far by an emotion of mind, which seems to be only zeal for what is right, and allows such short warning to be on our guard. If indeed we let one thing or another be provoking us almost perpetually, we must not think it a great alleviation, that our peevishness doth not dwell on any single point long, but quickly provides itself a fresh object. Or if we fly out at once into such extravagances, as to do in a little time almost as much mischief, as we could in a great deal: it is a poor plea to make in our own favour, that when we have fatiated our fury, or worn down our spirits with it, we are calm again.

But if undue hastiness neither returns frequently, nor goes outrageous lengths; though always a transgression, yet it is in some measure an excuseable one; whereas the aggravations of rooted lasting bitterness are most heinous. For when there hath been space for warmth to cool, for reason to resume its dominion, for religion to soften men into a spirit of forgiveness, for friends to interpose their advice and persuasions, for every motive to exert itself; still to continue implacable, and deliberately to fortify ourselves in the wrong, is confirmed wickedness. And yet men indulge it strangely: and if nothing chances in a very little while to appease their first rage, allow it to settle into a habit of ill will; which giving them less impetuous agitations, than they felt at first, they fancy themselves to have sufficiently recovered their temper, and proceed in their guilt without suspecting it. We should therefore be conscientiously

tiously watchful over our hearts in this particular. And readiest of all we should be to lay aside that displeasure, which we ought never to have entertained: and be friends again immediately, when it is our own fault, that we ever were otherwise. Yet, I fear, many cherish unreasonable resentment, because they secretly feel it is unreasonable, and never forgive those, whom they have once injured. They have run into a difficulty, out of which they cannot extricate themselves to their liking: and therefore will persist for ever in acting amiss, rather than own, that they have acted so at all. Now, it must be granted, their situation is a very mortifying one. Anger implies a charge upon another of misbehaviour. And when this charge hath been brought and urged, perhaps in very strong terms; to retract it, and make submissions instead of receiving them, must doubtless be a task highly disagreeable! which is an excellent reason for avoiding causeless wrath: but it is no reason for persevering in it. *Solomon's counsel is very wise: Go not forth hastily to strive, lest thou know not what to do in the end thereof, when thy neighbour hath put thee to shame* *. But if we are got into such a condition, the speediest retreat is the best. Good people will moderate our shame, by accepting our first advances towards a confession, that we have erred. And if others require fuller satisfaction, we must give it them: for it would be monstrous to do them yet more wrong, because we have done them some already.

But nearest in guilt to the anger, which was originally causeless, is that which becomes so by lasting beyond its cause. Many things furnish just ground of animadversion; so just, that we should be to blame, if we omitted it: and yet are of so slight a nature, that we should be more to blame, if we did not, after duly signifying our dislike of them, return immediately to our former disposition and behaviour, even towards the person concerned. For there would be no living in any comfort, if every little offence were to be lengthened out, and the most made of it that can. Therefore in such cases, far from *letting the sun go down upon our wrath* †, we should not let the next hour, sometimes the next moment, see the least marks of it. Where there is need, they may continue longer: and be increased or lessened, according to the occasion. The tokens of our displeasure may be suspended for a time, and gentler methods tried; which

* Prov. xxv. 8.

† Eph. iv. 26.

which are always the best, when they are likely to be effectual; then resumed, if circumstances demand it. But as soon as ever the fault is reformed, though not perfectly, yet as far as we can fairly expect, after all allowances made, (and in most cases a great many should be made) then without delay we should declare ourselves reconciled, for we cannot any longer *be angry and not sin*.

One principal discouragement of such reformation is, that we commonly require of persons, besides the assurance of giving no offence for the future, great submissions for what is past. And they should always think it their duty to make them: but we should for the most part think it ours not to insist on them. Indeed their chief objection against acknowledging their misdemeanour, frequently is, that they imagine it will be in vain. And were they but undeceived by any little intimations of our disposition to forgive, they would repay us fully afterwards for that goodness, to which they would gladly have applied before, if despair had not withheld them. Or if they cannot even thus be brought to own themselves culpable in so many words: yet perhaps they will do it, readily and sufficiently, in a less direct manner. And the truth is, that some sorts of acknowledgements may be unsuitable to some sorts of persons on some occasions. But if any one should by mistake apprehend it beneath him to comply with what in strictness he is bound to: yet, provided he shews but any way, that he is conscious of his error, and purposes to avoid it for the future, both charity and humanity forbid rigorous demands of more. Nay, though even such tacit confessions and promises may be somewhat imperfect and ambiguous, favourable and liberal constructions ought to be put upon them: for we should ever encourage persons to amend by facilitating the means of it, to the best of our power. Much more then is it incumbent on us to banish resentment intirely, when all the satisfaction hath been offered us, that can be made, though perhaps a full compensation can never be made. For it is not the damage, but the injury done us, that justifies our anger. And therefore, when the injury is removed by repentance, though the damage continue, the anger ought to cease: because the offender being now returned to his right mind, and become what he should, displeasure against him afterwards is displeasure against a good person, instead of a bad one.

I do not say, that we ought always immediately to believe every one, who professes concern, and makes fair promises. But we certainly ought to be careful, that passion doth not keep us from believing what in itself is probable. Unless we are as ready to be reconciled, as we were to be provoked; and give as much credit, upon equal proof, to the penitence, as we did to the crime; we are not in a reasonable and Christian temper. If therefore the evidences of any one's amendment be strong enough only to suspend our bad opinion of him, we should suspend our anger too: and as they grow sufficient to change it, we should change proportionably into kind behaviour, and due esteem.

Indeed, supposing there be no amendment in him, though we cannot possibly think well of him in that respect, yet we may in others; for there are strange mixtures in most people of faults and good qualities. Or, were we to think ever so ill of him upon the whole, and with ever so much cause, we should by no means be at liberty, even then, to cherish a constant indignation at him boiling in our breasts: but our disapprobation of his character ought to be gentle and mild. For when anger, from being an occasional passion for a time, degenerates into a settled state of mind, it deserves a harsher name, that of rancour. And though in such a state we may appear composed, and may in reality feel no vehement emotions, this alone is far from proving us innocent. If ill will be the principle of our conduct towards any of our fellow-creatures; if we suppress their merit, undervalue their good actions, give a bad turn to such as are capable of a better, aggravate their failures, and do them all the harm that we safely and quietly can; it is no alleviation, but the contrary, that we are able to do it without losing the command of ourselves. And there are some of so calm a malice, that they can plot and execute such mischief, as the most passionate man, in the very fit of his passion, would recoil at; and yet preserve to others, and perhaps to their own minds, the shew of being very good-tempered. But this deliberate silent hatred, as it is the deepest rooted and most durable, so it is the most horrible depravity of all others, and the farthest distant from that spirit of forgiveness, without which, we shall not be forgiven.

Let us therefore *in malice be children; but in understanding, men**: let us not be overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good†.

* 1 Cor. xiv. 20.

† Rom. xii. 21.

SERMON XXX.

ON ANGER.

EPHESIANS iv. 26.

Be ye angry, and sin not.

THE due bounds of anger, with the common excesses of them, have been described in my two last discourses : and therefore I now proceed,

II. To dissuade you from them, by shewing you their bad effects ; of which you cannot but have seen many already : but still it will be needful to set forth part of them more distinctly, and add others to them.

Some ill consequences of immoderate anger we feel immediately from the very workings of it within us. For the passion, prone as we are to indulge it, is essentially uneasy. The goodness of God hath constituted our inward frame in such a manner, that the kind affections are all attended with delight : but those emotions, which tend to give others pain, produce it first in ourselves, to restrain us from ever indulging them further than is necessary. The lowest degree of displeasure, as the mere word implies, must be unpleasing : presents unwelcome thoughts and views of things to the mind, which more or less unfit it, so long as they last, for the chearful and easy enjoyment of life. But if it rise to any height, its agitations are acutely miserable : they rack and tear our souls ; and, if they return frequently, consume our health and vigour : tho' indeed, were we ever so strong to bear them, there is no happiness in being able to support the renewal of torments. Then, besides this inseparable feeling, there must often, as it is very fit there should, be a second, for the time almost intolerable, that of failing in the mischief, to which our fury prompts us.

And

And yet success in it will only, after a short-lived inhuman transport, bring on a greater variety of dreadful sufferings. For there quickly succeeds a state unspeakably painful, of rage at ourselves instead of others; or at least of exhausted spirits, dejection at the remembrance of our wickedness and folly; bitter, and, it may be, fruitless, anguish for the cruel things that we have said or done. And the longer it is before we reflect thus, the more matter we hoard up to make reflection frightful, when it comes.

Indeed one single consideration might be enough to prove anger a wretched condition; that our enemies are always endeavouring to put us into it: whom it is an innocent revenge to mortify, by resolving to disappoint them; and preserve ourselves in a calm, whatever storms we see around us. He who doth this, hath found the true secret, for passing his days with comfort, and conducting his affairs happily. Such a one sees on all sides of him, and apprehends every thing just as it is: makes the most of each favourable opportunity; and gives disadvantageous circumstances the best turn of which they are capable. But passion so infatuates men, that they run directly upon evident ruin, without perceiving it: nor will they always avoid it, when they do perceive it. *A wise man feareth, and departeth from evil: but a fool rageth, and is confident* *. At best, they often lose a point of consequence by their warmth about a trifle; disoblige in a fit of peevishness their most zealous friends, and sometimes turn them into the most dangerous adversaries. For past intimacies furnish peculiar means of doing hurt for the future: and a *brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city* †. Then, at the same time that they provoke needless enmities, they give all their enemies needless advantages: often betraying their own designs, perpetually forwarding those of their opposers. For while they rashly press on upon others, they lay themselves open without defence, and verify the saying of the wise king: *He that hath no rule over his own spirit, is like a city that is broken down, and without walls* ‡. Nothing requires more coolness, than what usually raises the most heat: meeting with unreasonable opposition. They who cannot pass by small injuries unnoticed, will generally draw down great ones upon their own heads. For anger

VOL. I.

U u

on

* Prov. xiv. 16.

† Prov. xviii. 19.

‡ Prov. xxv. 28.

on such occasions, however just, serves only to make bad people worse, and afford them handles for doing more effectually what they wish. *Kindle not therefore the coals of a sinner, lest thou be burnt with the flame of his fire. Rise not up in anger at the presence of an injurious person, lest he lie in wait to intrap thee in thy words* *.

Another grievous disadvantage of a passionate temper is, that it hinders men from receiving advice. Not every one dares, and no one hath encouragement, to give it them. For they will seldom bear the intimation of an error in what they do, or an objection to what they propose. Nay, too commonly, alledging reasons against a thing, increases their positiveness in favour of it. For anger joins the two unfittest companions in the world, rashness and obstinacy. Or, if good counsel chances to be once followed, the same impatience, which hath brought them into one difficulty, will soon bring them into another as bad. So that, to use *Solomon's* words, *a man of great wrath shall suffer punishment: for if thou deliver him, yet thou must do it again* †. What usually inflames our resentments is the desire of promoting our own schemes and interests. Now, on the contrary, this is the very inducement which should moderate and check them. For however triumphantly outrageous people may seem to bear down all before them for a time; yet it is ever the cool head that carries the point at last. *Better is the end of a thing, than the beginning thereof: and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools* ‡. But supposing persons of this turn to have at heart, not their own private interest, but public good; very often their heat will mislead them to do evil instead of it; and that most dreadful evil. For the strong impression of being in the right, under which they act, inclines them to run greater lengths in what is wrong, than any thing else could. And thus *the wrath of man worketh not*, even when he may intend it, *the righteousness of God* §. Indeed were a design ever so well chosen, and harmlessly carried on, yet few things are so likely to hinder the success of it, as too great vehemence: which hath also this further inconvenience, that after they,

whom

* Ecclus. viii. 10, 11.

† Eccl. vii. 8, 9.

‡ Prov. xix. 19.

§ James i. 20.

whom it animates, have spent their first fire, they are the aptest of all others to flag and despair, and abandon their undertaking.

But, besides that we thus embarrass and disappoint ourselves, we ought to reflect what sort of figure we make to others. Generally people endeavour to hide their frailties: *but he that is hasty of spirit* proclaims his; and, as the scripture expresses it, *exalteth folly* *. He aims at the appearance indeed of great importance and superiority: and would have it pass for inward strength, that he exerts himself so immoderately. But unreasonable passions are no more a proof of healthy vigour in the soul, than fevers or convulsions are in the body. Every little accident affects and flutters an infirm constitution; while those of a juster make bear considerable changes undisturbed. In the same manner a rightly tempered mind repulses even great assaults without effort, and remains unmoved; while the slightest trials put a weak one into remarkable agitations. Persons of the tenderest frames, of the smallest experience and knowledge, of the lowest or the most impaired faculties, have usually the least command of themselves, when provoked. Nor doth the sudden fierceness, with which resentment inspires men, at all imply true bravery, though it may accidentally produce some effects like it: for this even extremity of fear will do. Then further, excessive anger is attended with all imaginable symptoms of weakness. For it makes the wisest people say and act the silliest things that can be; and become quite ridiculous, whilst they aim to appear terrible: threatening what they dare not do, attempting what they cannot do, and what, when the mad fit is a little over, for the world they would not, if they could: exposing themselves by the most wretched false reasonings; laying great stress upon trifles, that will bear none at all; and, when one wild assertion is confuted, running instantly to another to justify their choler, and all in vain. So piteous is the figure that the passionate make: and it is often a lasting shame, which the blustering affectation of false greatness brings upon them in a few moments. Composure is an essential part of true dignity: and an elevated soul is above taking notice of the impotent attacks, which a mean one shews its meanness by busying itself to resent and return.

U n 2

Some

* Prov. xiv. 29.

Some sort of exorbitant anger indeed is far from deserving contempt: but in proportion as it ceases to be despicable, it becomes hateful. Nay, it hath often both these bad qualities at once. The little fretfulness that goes no further than peevish words at every turn, though an object of derision, yet breaks grievously in upon the quiet of life, and freedom of conversation: puts every one, that comes near the person subject to it, under very disagreeable restraints; and usually to small purpose. For the least incident of a thousand shall be sufficient to turn his highest good humour into a furious rage, a perverse captiousness, or a sullen silence: while he himself doth not know, or is ashamed to tell, at what he is offended; and yet, like a froward child, grows the more unmanageable for the pains taken to please him. This must cause uneasiness to all that see it: but some have a tenderness of mind, that makes them feel it acutely. They fear they have done amiss, and search in vain for what can have given such great disgust. But especially they, who have either any affection for such an unreasonable person, or any interest depending on his regard for them, must be perpetually miserable with him. So that, when these wretches do no worse, they perplex and disquiet every one about them; and those most, to whom they should be the kindest. But when their passion bursts forth with any uncommon degree of vehemence, then it hath effects yet more serious: the most grating and disobliging things are said that can be invented: failings unmercifully exposed; cruel imputations, though known to be false, injuriously made; secrets divulged, that ought to have been for ever hidden; promises broken, that should have been kept inviolably: and all this, merely because an inconsiderate creature is pleased to be in a rage, perhaps without a shadow of ground for it.

Thus even the more transitory fits of anger hurry men into behaviour extremely wicked: and a storm of fury, that possibly doth not last a quarter of an hour, destroys or grievously diminishes the comfort of another, it may be through all his days. But when their displeasure takes deeper root, and infects the temper with a settled ill will, then they will make it the business of their lives to depress and sit heavy upon the object of their malignity, to frustrate his most equitable expectations, and follow him about with unwearied labours to blast the success of every thing which he undertakes. Neither generosity,

nor humanity, nor goodness of character, nor nearness of relation, nor greatness of favours received, can extinguish their resentment: which sometimes conceals itself under specious pretences and smiling appearances, watching the opportunity of some effectual mischief; at others, incapable of disguise, it blazes forth in open violence; laws and punishments, human and divine, are unable to deter them, and nothing short of immediate destruction will assuage their hatred. How pernicious must people of this character be in society! how dangerous must they appear in the eyes of men! how guilty in the sight of God! Guilty, not only of all the evil which they have directly done; but all which they have either incited others to do for them, or provoked others to do against them. For *an angry man stirreth up strife, and a furious man aboundeth in transgression* *.

The misbehaviours and cross accidents, of which this world is full, were intended to exercise those virtues of meekness and patience, which the next world is intended to reward. But to use the vexations of life as opportunities to run mad and do mischief, is acting contrary to the whole design of our Maker; contrary to the native tenderness of our own hearts, to our consciousness of human frailties, to the pity we ought to feel for the miseries of human circumstances; contrary to the dictates of natural religion, which requires us to imitate the goodness we adore, and to the most express precepts of Christianity, which allows us not the least hope of God's mercy on any other condition than this, that *if we forgive men their trespasses, our heavenly Father will also forgive us* †.

But here some will plead, that however hurtful to ourselves or others this passion may be, it cannot be so sinful as it hath been represented, because it is often involuntary. And some degrees of it, we must own, seem to be so: and the temptations of our corrupt nature, to very blameable degrees, are often exceedingly strong. But still in such cases we are strangely willing to believe much less to be in our power, than, by the help of God's grace, is. And the way to know how far it really extends, will be, not to imagine about it, and lament that we cannot do what in truth we can do very well; but to try, and that by the use of proper means. For they, who are
totally

* Prov. xxix. 22.

† Matth. vi. 14.

totally unable to check their passion by an immediate effort of their mind at the time, had they governed themselves rightly before, perhaps would scarce have felt any passion to check. And therefore I shall now proceed in conclusion,

III. To direct how excessive anger may best be avoided.

Now the great general rule for this and every good purpose is, to obtain from God, by reading his holy word, by meditation and prayer, the spirit of love to him and to our neighbour. In proportion as that *rules in our hearts* *, we shall be humble and meek, live as being always in his presence, fear to offend him, desire to please him, labour to imitate him: we shall think often and seriously what great provocations from us our heavenly Father hath passed over, through so long a course of years; what shocking indignities our blessed Redeemer underwent contentedly and silently for our sakes; with what persevering patience the Holy Ghost offers to us his sanctifying influences, notwithstanding all we do to grieve him; how effectually pious men, in all ages, have been moved by these benefits to copy the divine long-suffering: we shall learn to bear with our fellow-sinners, with whom the Almighty bears: we shall call to mind, that he hath made them of the same blood, united them into the same body under Christ our head, strives with them by the same spirit: we shall recollect, that he commands us to forgive each others trespasses, and promote each others happiness, and will treat us as we treat our brethren: that all the vexations which befall us here, if we go thro' them with the temper which we ought, instead of doing us the least harm, shall unspeakably augment our felicity hereafter; and that by all the injuries which others do us, however they may triumph in them at present, they are only *heaping coals of fire on their own heads* †: a consideration that surely should melt our anger into pity, and induce us never to go a step farther in correction or resentment than security requires; but leave vengeance to him whose it is. Thus then from the two inseparable commandments of love to God and man, flow inestimable motives to mild sentiments and gentle behaviour, by which pious and Christian minds will be powerfully influenced; experiencing not only their natural force, but the additional efficacy of divine grace, annexed to the use of them. And there

* Col. iii. 15.

† Rom. xii. 20.

there is no other radical cure of irregular passions. But still, together with this universal medicine, there are several auxiliary and appropriated rules of regimen during our continuance in the course of it, to be followed, and therefore needful to be specified.

One is, that we avoid forming refined and romantic notions of human perfection in any thing. For these are much apter to heighten our expectations from others, and our demands upon them, than to increase our watchfulness over ourselves : and so every failure provokes us more highly than it would have done else. A sense of things, too delicate for our nature, and the state in which we live, is no accomplishment, but an infirmity. And overstrained notions of friendship and honour, or any virtuous attainment, constantly do harm. For if we fancy ourselves arrived at these heights, we shall resent it as profanation, when the rest of the world treat us as being nearly on the level with them, which yet they certainly will. And if we go to measure those around us by these ideas ; we shall look on persons, whenever we have a mind to do so, as monsters not to be supported, who, in a reasonable way of thinking, would appear very tolerably good people. We should therefore endeavour, by frequent reflection, to form a habit of judging with moderation concerning our neighbours and ourselves. Man is a fallen being, defective in his understanding, and depraved in his inclinations ; placed in circumstances, in which many things call him off from what he should do, many things prompt him to what he should not do ; and often, before he hath well learned to distinguish one from the other, or too suddenly for him to apply the distinction rightly.

Now only reflect, when a multitude of such creatures as these are put to live together, with interests and appetites, humours and fancies, interfering every hour ; what a number of wrong actions must of course be continually done, and some of them very wrong : which yet may be attended with such alleviations, that even a superior faultless nature, looking down upon our earth, would by no means impute all that was amiss, as heinous guilt to the persons that did it. This however is no reason, why we should indulge ourselves in failings : for wilful indulgence is always criminal. But it is a strong reason, why we should not be bitter against others, on finding them such, as we had cause to expect they would be : but receive a large share
of

of uneasiness from them contentedly, and a small one, with thankfulness that it is no greater ; especially considering, what we can never bear in the mind too much, that no one of us is that superior faultless nature, which I have been supposing ; but each of us a poor frail being, with the seeds in him at least of all the vile actions, that we charge upon others : and on the whole perhaps as bad, perhaps even worse than some of those, at whom we are so vehemently exasperated.

Almost every one is apt to join some notion of peculiar dignity to his own person : and to imagine, that offences are greatly aggravated by being committed against him : that his character and concerns, his family and friends, his opinions and taste, ought to be treated with a singular degree of regard. But then really we should remember, that multitudes besides may just as allowably think the same thing of theirs ; indeed that all men are as dear to themselves, as we can be to ourselves : which brings us back so far upon the level again. And the serious consideration of it must surely convince us, that our common interest, as well as duty, is, to think and act mildly ; that *pride was not made for man, nor furious anger for them that are born of a woman* *.

Other directions must be given more briefly. One is not to indulge ourselves in any sort of over great niceness and delicacy : for it hardly ever gives real pleasure, and it furnishes perpetual occasions of disgust and fretfulness. Another is, to avoid inquisitiveness after materials for anger to work upon. It is better not to hear of every little wrong thing that is done about us, or said of us. And therefore we should never encourage persons in the officiousness of acquainting us with them needlessly : but always have some suspicion of such as are peculiarly forward in it. For innumerable are the friendships and agreeable acquaintances that have been broken off, and the resentments and animosities raised, by tales and insinuations of this kind, either wholly or in part false ; or idle and trifling, though true. Two other important rules, and closely connected, are : first, never to engage by choice in more business, than we can easily manage ; for that, by causing hurry and frequent miscarriages, will certainly cause vexation and peevishness : then, to preserve a steady attention to what we do
engage

* Ecclus. x. 18.

engage in. Men are often grossly negligent of their affairs: and afterwards furiously angry at those disorders in them, for which they themselves are almost, if not quite, as much to blame, as others. Now regular care would have prevented mismanagement: which alternate fits of remissness and rage will never do. Indeed we should obviate, as far as we can, every thing, that we find apt to ruffle our minds: and carry the precaution down even to our diversions and amusements. For some of these have often so very bad an effect upon the temper, that not to apply so easy a remedy as laying them aside, is really inexcusable. Another material thing to be shunned, is familiarity with passionate persons: not only for the very plain reason, lest they should provoke us, but also lest their example should infect us. *Make no friendship with an angry man, and with a furious man thou shalt not go: lest thou learn his ways, and get a snare to thy soul* *. But to converse with those, who are of mild dispositions, to observe how they take things, and be advised by them how we should take them, will be of unspeakable service.

These are preparations before danger. When it approaches near, the main point is, to recollect, how dreadful it would be to give way and lose ourselves, and to resolve that we will not. Towards keeping this resolution, we shall find it one great preservative, though it may seem a slight matter, not to let the accent of our speech, or any one of our gestures be vehement. For these things excite passion mechanically: whereas a *soft answer*, the scripture tells us, *turneth away wrath* †: composes the spirit of the giver himself, as well as the receiver of it. Also making use of the gentlest and least grating terms, that we can, will be extremely beneficial: and accordingly it follows there, that *grievous words stir up anger*.

But if such begin to present themselves, and struggle for vent, we must resolve to utter as few of any sort as possible: or, if it become requisite, none at all: but shut fast the door of our lips, *till the mastiff within hath done barking*, as is related to have been the practice of *Socrates* ‡. It is a painful re-

VOL. I.

X x

straint:

* Prov. xxii. 24.

† Prov. xv. 1.

‡ Προς δε το μη συναρπαδηναι συνεργει τα μεγα ελεειναι—σιωπαν εως αν της ενδοθεν αναξισιως αιδαμιδα καταλαβησες, και ο εν ημιν κυων μεκει υλακτη. Λεγεται γυν και Σωκρατης, ηποτε θυμωθεν, παντως σιωπαν. Simpl. in Epict. c. 28. p. 135. Comp. Cic. ad Quintum fratrem, l. 1. ep 1. §. 13.

straint: but if we will remain masters of ourselves, it is absolutely necessary. For one hasty expression bursting out, makes freer way for another: till at last the banks are levelled, and the torrent carries all before it. *A patient man therefore will bear for a time, and afterwards joy shall spring up unto him. He will bide his words for a time, and the lips of many shall declare his wisdom**. But above all, we should inviolably observe never to act in a heat. Thoughts, alas, will be too quick for us: a few improper words may escape: but actions are much more in our power. We may be too angry at present to venture upon acting at all: a little delay can do no harm, and may do a great deal of good. Only when we take time, we should make a right use of it: not revolve an insignificant offence in our minds, interpret little incidents with perverse acuteness, and lay stress upon groundless fancies, till we work it up into a heinous crime. The best understandings, without good tempers, can go the greatest lengths in this way: and employing their reflection to excite the displeasure, which it ought to restrain, the longer they ruminate, the more untractable they grow. Now passion may be trusted very safely to suggest all the aggravating circumstances. Reason therefore should be called in, only to represent the alleviating considerations: of which we perpetually overlook so many and so important ones, that we should give those about us all possible encouragement to remind us of them. And if the person, by whom we think ourselves aggrieved, be one, with whom we have any close connection, or of whom we have ground to think advantageously; laying our complaint mildly before him, and hearkening impartially to his answer, may very possibly set all right, and place us on a better footing, than ever we were before. *Admonish a friend: it may be he hath not done it; and if he have done it, that he do it no more. Admonish thy friend: it may be he hath not said it: and if he have, that he speak it not again. Admonish a friend: for many times it is a slander: and believe not every tale. There is one, that slippeth in his speech; but not from his heart: and who is he, that hath not offended with his tongue? Admonish thy neighbour, before thou threaten him: and, not being angry, give place to the law of the most High†*. Only this caution ought to be observed in the case, that

* Ecclus. i. 23, 24.

† Ecclus. xix. 13,—17.

that such, as are naturally warm and impatient, should but seldom risk a personal explanation at first: but rather employ some common well-wisher; on whose probity and prudence they can safely depend, that he will moderate, not inflame, matters by interposing. And when thus, or any way, the subject of difference is rightly stated: if the other party be innocent, let us admit it with pleasure; if he own his fault, though not so fully as he should, let us receive his acknowledgement with generosity. And if, in return, he brings a charge against us: let us say with calmness what we have to say justly in our own favour; confess frankly, with due concern, whatever hath been amiss; and where there is no room for a defence, attempt no palliation; but follow the injunction of scripture: *If thou hast done foolishly, or if thou hast thought evil, lay thine hand upon thy mouth* *. It will be very dishonourable, and very strange in him, to treat us unkindly upon this. But if he doth, we must submit patiently to what we have brought upon ourselves; and not be guilty of a second misdemeanour, because our first is not handsomely forgiven us.

These rules we shall, every one of us, more or less, violate. But then, through God's grace, we may turn even our transgressions of them to our benefit, by gaining such experimental knowledge of ourselves, as will supply us with specific directions fitted to our own case; and on that account far surer to be successful at last, than any more general ones, that can be prescribed to us by others.

And now, after thus delivering rules for the prevention or cure of unwarrantable resentment, both which are works of no small difficulty, let me add in conclusion, that all around us ought to assist us in them: and particularly, by conscientiously abstaining from throwing in our way any temptations to that sin. The intemperate heat of the passionate is very blameable: but the deliberate wickedness of the cool and artful, who rouse them into passion, is abominable: and even the sportful teazings of malicious mirth, when employed against such, deserve no slight censure. St. Paul twice admonishes parents, *not to provoke their children to wrath* †: probably because it might be likely to give an early wrong turn to their tender minds. Now, if it be unlawful to excite a short-lived anger in these,

X x 2

who

* Prov. xxx. 32.

† Eph. vi. 4. Col. iii. 21.

who are many of them incapable of doing hurt, be they ever so angry; how great a crime is it to stir up rage, where the consequence may be unknown mischief of various sorts: and how excellent a duty, to take every opportunity, (and we have all of us frequently such) for disposing the hearts of those about us to that spirit of meekness and universal good-will, which is the qualification for happiness here and hereafter! *The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace* *. *Sow to yourselves in righteousness, and reap in mercy* †.

* James iii. 18.

† Hof. x. 12.

S E R M O N X X X I .

ON OATHS.

JAMES V. 12.

But above all things, my brethren, swear not ; neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath ; but let your yea be yea, and your nay, nay ; lest ye fall into condemnation.

THIS precept of St. James is plainly taken from that part of our Saviour's sermon on the mount, where just the same prohibition occurs, only expressed more at large, in the following words : *Ye have heard, that it hath been said by them of old time, thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths. But I say unto you, swear not at all : neither by heaven, for it is God's throne ; nor by the earth, for it is his footstool ; neither by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king ; neither shalt thou swear by thy head ; for thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be yea, yea ; nay, nay : for whatsoever is more than these, cometh of evil**. These are the only texts of scripture, where we meet with any command of this kind. And therefore to understand aright, as it greatly concerns us, what the Christian doctrine is in relation to oaths ; our business must be to consider well, and compare together these two passages. There is unquestionably a strong appearance at first sight, that all oaths without exception are forbidden in them : and it is no wonder, that many have been carried away by that appearance, and held it unlawful to swear upon any occasion. But whoever
will

* Matth. v. 33,—37.

will examine the matter thoroughly, can hardly fail, I think, to be fully satisfied of the contrary.

That an oath hath no unlawfulness in its own nature, needs very little proof. For what is it? It is acknowledging ourselves to stand in the presence of God, and have him for the witness of what we say: it is declaring ourselves to be sensible, that if we speak falsely, we forfeit his favour; and confessing, that we forfeit it justly. Now these are truths, all of them highly honourable to God: and it cannot be sinful, it is indeed an act of piety and worship, to make a serious profession of them before him. And for the only thing besides, which an oath is taken to imply, that we freely consent to become objects of his anger, if we are not sincere; it must evidently be limited to such consent, as we are capable of giving, to what will equally follow, whether we consent or not. We speak in the same manner on common occasions perpetually; and tell those, to whom we apply, that if such or such a thing, which we say, be not true, we willingly renounce all claim to their friendship. The expression is universally understood, and used without scruple, between men: and it is just as intelligible, and allowable too, when addressed to God.

Oaths therefore, in themselves, are certainly lawful: and farther, they are highly useful also. For men are so extremely prone, both to conceal truth, and to speak untruths, when their passions, or their interests, prompt them to do so; that they have need of the most powerful restraints to keep them from it; and those to be enforced, in the most affecting manner, on their consciences. Now undoubtedly the thought, that God knows and will avenge it, if we transgress, may awaken and check men, when nothing else can. And the most effectual way of bringing that thought strongly into our minds, is requiring us to make a solemn acknowledgment of it, as in his presence. He is indeed equally present, and equally just, whether we invoke him or not. But it is our sense of his presence and justice that must influence us: and nothing can possibly either excite or testify that so completely as an oath.

It must be owned, great numbers will certainly speak truth without an oath: and too many will not speak it with one. But the generality of mankind are of a middle sort: neither so virtuous, as to be safely trusted, in cases of importance, on their bare word; nor yet so abandoned, as to violate a more
solemn

solemn engagement. Accordingly we find by experience, that many will boldly say, what they will by no means adventure to swear: and the difference, which they make between these two things, is often indeed much greater than they should; but still it shews the need of insisting on the strongest security. When once men are under that awful tie, and as the scripture phrase is, *have bound their souls with a bond**, it composes their passions, counterbalances their prejudices and interests, makes them mindful of what they promise, and careful what they assert; puts them upon exactness in every circumstance: and circumstances are often very material things. Even the good might be too negligent, and the bad would frequently have no concern at all, about their words, if it were not for the solemnity of this religious act. And a farther advantage of it is, that when we have thus had the strongest assurance given us, which we can have, concerning any matter, we are naturally disposed to acquiesce in it: and *an oath for confirmation* becomes the *end of all strife*†.

This practice therefore is of so great consequence, that human society would scarce be kept in tolerable order by any other means. Perhaps indeed a small community, of which every member scrupled taking an oath, may, by strict discipline, subsist for some time without it: and a small sect of such persons, in the midst of a larger community, may, under due limitations, be safely excused from it also, whilst they continue sufficiently distinguished from the rest of the world; and whilst the value, which they set on this indulgence, makes them fearful of doing any thing to forfeit it. But were such a permission to become general throughout a large nation, especially one enjoying wealth and commerce and liberty; were all the different sorts of persons in it to be released at once from what they all looked on as their strongest obligation to truth; it is easy to see, that universal confusion must inevitably follow. And there is not any age, or nation of the world, but have shewn, that they were sensible of this. All governments have ever required the most highly esteemed of their subjects, on every fit occasion, to confirm their testimony by an appeal to God: for if it is not demanded of every one who is able to give it with a good conscience, how can it be expected of any?

Not only amongst the heathens therefore, but amongst the
holy

* Numb. xxx. 2.

† Heb. vi. 16.

holy patriarchs also, from early times, good men have asked, and equally good men have given, the security of an oath. God himself is represented in scripture as swearing to men: and men are not only introduced swearing to God; *I have sworn, and am stedfastly purposed to keep thy commandments* *; but in the law of *Moses*, they are expressly commanded to *swear by his name* to one another†. Cases are specified, in which *the oath of the Lord shall be between them* ‡: and it is appointed, that if any man *hear the voice of swearing*, that is, have the form of an oath pronounced to him, as called to be *a witness*, by the magistrate; if he doth not utter upon that oath, what *he hath seen or known* of the matter, *he shall bear his iniquity* §. Nor do the prophets, though they sometimes improve upon the law, and carry things to a higher degree of purity and strictness, ever mention oaths, but with honour; provided men *swear as Jeremiah* directs, *in truth, in judgment, and in righteousness* ¶. And far from intimating, that under the Messiah this act of religion would become unlawful; they foretell, in passages, which must be understood of the gospel times. that then *unto God every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall swear* ||.

But as all things are liable to abuse, and few things in religion have escaped it; great abuses in the matter of oaths had prevailed amongst the *Jews* before our Saviour's days. Prompted by wicked motives to interpret away the obligation of the third commandment, as far as they could, some of them pretended, that swearing to a vain thing meant only swearing to a false one; and therefore made no scruple at all of needless oaths, if they were but true ones. Others, because it was only said, *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain*, thought it very lawful, so they did not use that name expressly, to swear when they would, by other forms, however equivalent **. And upon this imagination a yet worse was grafted; that

* Ps. cxix. 106. † Deut. x. 20. ‡ Exod. xxii. 11. § Lev. v. 1.

¶ Jer. iv. 2. || Isa. xlv. 23. See also xix. 18. and lxxv. 16.

** *Philo* περί των ειδει νομων. *Lightf.* in *Matth.* v. Amongst the Heathens, *Rhadamanthus* first forbade swearing by the gods, and directed them to swear by the goose, and the dog, the ram, and the like. *Socrat.* l. 12. *rerum Grecicarum in Schol.* *Aristoph.* in *Av.* which *Euseb.* in *Od.* Γ. p. 1871. *Ed. Rom.* saith he did υπερ του μη διον ονομαζειν επι πασιν. And *Porphyry de Abst.* l. 3. p. 285, saith, *Socrates* followed this law of *Rhadamanthus*. *Socrates* saith in *Plato's Gorgias*, Μα τον κυρη, τον εγγυητορ διον. *Jabl. Panth. Eg.* l. 5. c. 1. § 5.

that such oaths, not being of the sort, to which alone the law related, they were liable to no punishment for breaking them, nor consequently obliged to keep them *. For these notions we find in their writings preserved to this day. Indeed our Saviour informs us, that in his time they did not conceive all such oaths to be void, but some only. If a man *swore by the altar, it was nothing* : if *by the gift upon it*, that was binding. And other like distinctions without a difference they had ; by which the artful could entangle others, and keep themselves free †.

Such then being the advantages of oaths, and such the Jewish perversions of them ; which is it likely that our blessed Lord intended to forbid ; the total use, or the abuse only ? Is it credible in the least, that he, *whose kingdom is not of this world* ‡, should mean to take away from all the governments of the world, a right which they had enjoyed from the creation to that day ? Can it be imagined, that the greatest lover of mankind that ever was, would loose the firmest bonds of human society ; and make it a part of his reformation of things, to forbid our acknowledging ourselves to speak in the presence of God, and to incur his displeasure, if we speak falsely ? Certainly this was not his intention, if his words can possibly signify any thing else : and I shall proceed to shew you, that they naturally may ; indeed, that they must.

It is true, the prohibition is at first view absolute and general : but so are many others in scripture, and particularly in the sermon on the mount, which yet every one allows to have their limitations in the nature of the thing. The very next prohibition after this, is just as general : *But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil* §. Yet on some occasions, and in some ways, we all do and ought to resist it. Another in the next chapter is, *Take therefore no thought for the morrow* ¶. And a third immediately follows, *Judge not that ye be not judged* ||. Here all the world understands our Saviour to speak only of needless thought and rash judgment. And why then should not we understand him to speak of needless and rash swearing ; and apprehend, that he chose such comprehensive terms on all these subjects, because there was much occasion to warn men

VOL. I.

Y y

strongly ;

* *Lightf.* in Matth. v. † Matth. xxxiii. 16,—22. See *Wolf.* Matth. v. 35.

‡ John xviii. 36. § Matth. v. 39. ¶ Matth. vi. 34. || Matth. vii. 1.

strongly; and in comparison little danger of their failing to make proper exceptions? There is full as much ground in the reason of the case, to think thus of the point before us, as of the rest: and there is farther ground from his words themselves; for they are visibly pointed against the *Jewish* evasions, which I have just mentioned to you. Some of them imagined, they could not sin by other than false swearing. He therefore tells them, that swearing at all was a sin; meaning, where they could avoid it: but swearing before a magistrate they could not avoid. Some again thought, if God was not named, the oath was harmless. He therefore shews them, that their other common forms were of the same nature, as if they did name him; for they all referred to him; *Heaven was his throne, earth his foot-stool, Jerusalem his city*; their heads and lives were preserved by his power, not their own*. So that swearing by such things, indeed by any thing, is in effect swearing by God himself: (For *the world is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof*†:) and bringing any part of it into the form of an oath, can have no other sense than appealing to him, as the disposer of that, and the whole. Now from hence again our Saviour appears not to condemn swearing before an officer of justice; for on such an occasion these forms were never admitted. And what he doth condemn, the words following his prohibition, joined with it, as they ought, shew plainly enough. *Swear not at all: but let your communication be, yea, yea; nay, nay.* *Communication*, here and elsewhere, means, discourse with one another: as when St. Paul directs, *Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth*‡. The original word, as well as the *English*, is the same in both places, and confessedly denotes this. Oaths in common talk therefore are the thing, which our blessed Lord intended to forbid, and nothing else. Had he designed to prohibit more, he would have said, "Swear not at all, but let your answer, even though a magistrate require an oath of you, be only yea, yea; and nay, nay." But when he saith only, *Swear not at all, but let your communication*, your usual discourse consist of naked assertions, and no more; we cannot reasonably extend the first part of his precept beyond the latter; but must understand the case, in which we are forbidden swearing, to be the same with that

* Matth. v. 34, 35, 36.

† Psal. l. 12.

‡ Eph. iv. 29.

that, in which we are confined to bare affirming or denying: which is our daily familiar speech. And a farther confirmation of this, if it needs one, follows in what he adds: *For whatsoever is more than these, cometh of evil.* Now common swearing can indeed come only of evil. But taking a solemn oath, on affairs of moment, may come, and often doth, from reverence of our Maker, from desire of maintaining peace and justice amongst our fellow-creatures: and actually maintains them in a better degree, than could be done without it.

Our Saviour's words then sufficiently interpret themselves: and they interpret those of the text by necessary consequence. For if he intended only to prohibit common swearing in conversation, St. James, we may be sure, intended no more than his Master did; especially in words, that are evidently copied from his Master's. If they are without dependence on what comes before and after, we have no other rule to explain them by. And if they are connected with it, the connexion leads us to the same sense. In the 8th verse he exhorts to patience under afflictions. In the 9th he cautions against one common mark of wanting it, envying the more prosperous: *Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned.* Then after setting before them examples of patience, in the 10th and 11th; he proceeds, in the 12th, to warn them of another fault, which impatience too frequently produces: *But above all things, my brethren, swear not:* have a peculiar care, that your sufferings and injuries tempt you not to a passionate and profane use of the name of God: nay, *Swear not by heaven, or by earth, or by any other oath:* do not imagine, that softening and mincing your imprecations will change the nature of them: *but let your yea, be yea; and your nay, nay:* let your assertions and denials, under the greatest provocations, be mere assertions and denials, without any superadded vehemence of phrase: *lest you fall into condemnation* for irreligious expressions of warmth, as others will for uncharitable repining. We have therefore no manner of reason to think, that St. James disapproved swearing before a magistrate, to which his prohibition of swearing by heaven and earth cannot possibly relate; or even swearing on any other solemn and needful occasion: but only such oaths, as are apt to break out in common speech, especially from persons under oppression.

And it is very material to observe farther, that the more serious and strict of the *Jewish* teachers themselves forbid swearing in the same general terms, with our Saviour and St. *James*. But when they say, as more than one of them doth, that "it is good for a man not to swear at all;" do they mean, that it is good for him not to swear in cases, where their own law requires that he shall swear? Nay *Solomon* himself mentions the character of him *that sweareth*, as a blameable one: and of him *that feareth an oath*, as a commendable one*. Doth he mean to contradict *Moses*, whose law was then in force, and to say no man should take an oath on any exigence whatever? No certainly: but that he ought to avoid it, whenever, consistently with other obligations, it can be avoided. Nay, the heathen moralists also, at one time seem to prohibit swearing absolutely; and at another interpret their intention to be, that an oath should be used very sparingly†. In short, their words and our Saviour's too, were meant and taken in exactly the same manner as ours at present, when at any time we direct a child, or a servant, that they must be sure never to swear. And there is a most remarkable instance, in the *Jewish* historian *Josephus*‡, of the necessity of interpreting this rule with some exceptions; though it be laid down in as absolute and strong terms, as well can be. The *Essenes*, a sect of that nation, he tells us, had so great an abhorrence of swearing, that they looked upon taking an oath, even as a worse crime than breaking it. And yet these very persons, he informs us but a few lines after, were obliged, on their admission into that sect, to take a most solemn oath. And therefore in reality they could condemn only needless ones, however generally they might speak, to guard against them the better.

But we have still further evidence, that some oaths remained, after our Saviour's prohibition, as lawful as before. He himself, our faultless pattern, made use of them. When *the high priest adjured him by the living God, to say, if he were the Christ, the Son of the blessed*; he affirmed upon oath, that he was §. For, according to the *Jewish* manner of swearing in their courts of justice, the magistrate, as I have already observed

* Eccl. ix. 2.

† See beginning of serm. 34.

‡ B. J. l. 2. c. 8. § 6, 7. p. 162, 163. Ed. Haverc.

§ Matth. xxvi. 63, 64. Mark xiv. 61, 62.

observed to you, pronounced the form of the oath, and then the person brought before him, was understood to speak under the obligation of it. Now to all the questions of the high priest before, our blessed Lord had returned no answer: but to this, which he would have answered least of all, if judicial oaths had been contrary to his own precepts, he answers immediately. Nay, we find him uttering a solemn oath, even where the magistrates authority was not interposed: *Verily I say unto you*, we translate it, *there shall be no sign given*; but the original is, *if there shall be a sign given to this generation**: which, the learned well know, is only an abridgement of the common phrase, “*The Lord do so to me, and more also, if*” “*this be not true.*” But, lest any one should alledge, though without a shadow of reason, that our Saviour might exempt himself from what he bound his disciples to; observe farther, that one of the most eminent of them, *St. Paul*, hath in several of his epistles made use of one form or another of swearing, on occasions, which he saw were proper: *God is my witness* †: *I call God for a record upon my soul* §: *These things, which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not* ¶. And, which is yet more, he writes to the *Theſſalonians* thus: *I adjure you by the Lord*, (for the marginal translation is the right one,) *I lay you under the tie of an oath, that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren* ||. Now is it possible that he should understand so little, or observe so ill, the rules of that gospel, which he had learnt from Christ himself by revelation, and received an extraordinary commission of apostleship to teach, as both to do himself, and oblige others to do, what Christ had forbidden; and even be guilty of it in those very writings, which make part of God’s word? Or is not his practice, in these circumstances, an abundantly sufficient commentary on our Saviour’s doctrine? We have, besides this, if it were wanted, the testimony of *Clement of Alexandria* **, a writer of the second century, that *St. John* gave an assurance upon oath to a young man, whose unhappy case he apprehended to need it.

What

* Mark viii. 12. † Ruth i. 17. 2 Sam. iii. 3. xix. 13. ‡ Rom. i. 9.

§ 2 Cor. i. 23. ¶ Gal. i. 20. || Theſſ. v. 27. Ὁρκίζω ὑμᾶς.

** Lib. quis dives salvabitur et. ap. Euseb. H. E. l. 3. c. 23. Ο δ’ ἐγγυωμένος, ἠρκυμένους, ὡς ἀπὸ τινος ἐν τῇ [σὲ] ταλ. κ. τ. λ.

What the practice of Christians in the two succeeding ages was, is neither so material, nor quite certain. Some of them perhaps might think that our Saviour had absolutely condemned all swearing *. Others like him might speak against it strongly in general: and yet like him allow of exceptions. But no wonder, if they were seldom willing to swear before heathen magistrates, because they must usually have sworn by heathen gods. And therefore *Tertullian*, who also lived in the second century, acquainted the emperors in his apology †, what sort of oaths a believer in Christ could take; and what he could not. But as soon as ever Christianity was established, magistrates required this security, and subjects gave it, just as freely as had been done among the *Jews* before.

All these considerations unite in shewing, that the words of our Saviour and St. *James* relate only to swearing without necessity, in discourse. But indeed were there much less to favour this limitation, yet while the state of the world continues such as it is; if questions of importance arise, as they often do, which cannot be decided as they ought, without our testimony, and the magistrates will accept no testimony, except upon oath; how must we act? Must we stand by, and see falsehood and wickedness triumph, and the fortunes and lives of men taken away unjustly, rather than do a thing, confessedly lawful in itself, to prevent it? Or ought we not in such a case to follow the direction, *I will have mercy, and not sacrifice* ‡; prefer the moral and unchangeable duty of supporting truth and right, before the positive and mutable one, if it were one, of abstaining from an oath.

But the case of oaths not imposed by the magistrate, is very different. And we ought to be extremely cautious about them, and manifest a strong reluctance to take them. It is true, our Saviour's prohibition is only of swearing in common discourse: and what we deliberately assert on occurrences of more than ordinary moment, is of a nature very superior to common discourse:

* *Basiliides*, when newly turned Christian, and required by his fellow-soldiers to take an oath, *μη εἶναι αὐτῷ παραπαι ομνύειν διαβεβαιῶντο· χριστιανὸν γὰρ ὑπαρχεῖν*. *Euseb. H. E. l. 6. c. 5.*

† C. 32. Sed. et juramus, sicut non per genios Cæsarum, sic per salutem eorum, quæ augustior est omnibus geniis.

‡ *Hos. vi. 6. Matth. ix. 13. xii. 7.*

course: for which reason, and especially since he and his apostles did on such occasions make use of oaths, it is not always unlawful for us to do so too. But it is much more expedient and prudent; it shews a far higher reverence of the name of God, and a more pious fear of transgressing; it is keeping ourselves from the appearance, from the borders of evil; from becoming guilty insensibly, and then more and more guilty; resolutely to avoid such oaths, whenever we possibly can: and most men may avoid them intirely. It happens exceedingly seldom, to very few of us, that our sincerity cannot be sufficiently evidenced, if we will, by other methods of making it believed, that will appear abundantly worthy of credit; without the awful solemnity of an appeal to God; which ought to be sacredly reserved for emergencies of uncommon necessity.

Thus I have endeavoured to shew you, how far oaths are lawful. And the subject is material enough to be thus enlarged on, were it only for the three following reasons: that Christianity may not lie under the imputation, for a heavy one it would be, of censuring as criminal, what the welfare of society makes indispensable: that the whole body of its professors may not be accused of authorizing the transgressions of one of its of fundamental precepts: and that none of you in particular, if at any time called to give your testimony in a legal manner, may do it with a conscience doubtful, whether you do well or ill: *for whatsoever is not of faith is sin* *. But a fourth use may be, to lay open the error of some, who imagine themselves led more immediately, than others, by the spirit of God within them: but indeed are led, in this matter at least, by mistaken appearances, to condemn what scripture hath not condemned, and the good of mankind requires to be practised. Only you will remember, that though the consequences of their opinion, were it to prevail, would be extremely hurtful; yet they cannot intend those consequences: for that would be intending harm to themselves, as well as others.

There is yet one more, and a very serious use to be made of the doctrine you have heard: that if the bond of an oath, on fit occasions, be of such importance to society; since an awful regard to God is what gives to all oaths their whole force and efficacy, that regard should be cultivated with the utmost care;

* Rom. xiv. 23.

care; whatever may lessen it, discountenanced, whatever may augment it, encouraged: else, besides losing all the direction and the comfort, which religion gives to well disposed persons; all the restraint, which it lays on others, will be lost too: and the dread of an Almighty avenger being taken away, the most sacred of obligations will become no better, than a more effectual means of committing injustice. Human laws will soon prove too weak, when those of heaven are cast off: *every one will do what is right in his own eyes* *, and every man's hand be against his brother. Therefore diligently preserve the reverence of God strong upon your own hearts, and the hearts of all who belong to you: for *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have they, that do thereafter: the praise of it endureth for ever* †.

* Judges xvii. 6. xxi. 25.

† Psalm cxi. 10.

S E R M O N XXXII.

ON OATHS.

EXOD. XX. 7.

Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain ; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless, that taketh his name in vain.

HAVING already shewn, that the Christian religion hath not forbidden the use of all oaths : it is natural to consider distinctly, in the next place, those kinds of oaths which are forbidden. And I have chosen to speak of this matter from the third commandment : which would have been of very small significancy under the gospel, as it only prohibits swearing in vain, if our Saviour, by a subsequent law, had prohibited swearing at all. But as you have now seen that he doth not, it still continues to be of the same force and weight, as when it was delivered at first from the mouth of God himself, with that awful solemnity, which you may read in the chapter before the text : when *the Lord descended upon mount Sinai in fire ; with thunders and lightnings, and the voice of a trumpet exceeding loud ; and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly* *. And the Lord spake with a great voice, unto all the assembly out of the midst of the fire, of the cloud and of the thick darkness, these words †, which I have laid before you.

Precepts, delivered in such a manner, we may be sure God will expect us to obey with more than ordinary care : and therefore we are deeply concerned to acquaint ourselves with

VOL. I.

Z z

the

* Exod. xix. 16, 18.

† Deut. v. 22.

the import and extent of them. Now the words of this commandment are very comprehensive. For, as *vanity* signifies in scripture language, both what hath no being, and what is of no importance, and therefore is considered as if it had no being; so applying the name of God to *vanity*, (which is the most literal translation of the words rendered *taking it in vain*) signifies of consequence giving testimony upon oath, either to what is not, or to what in comparison is nothing: that is, either to falsehoods, or to trifles. Undoubtedly swearing to falsehoods is the chief thing forbidden here; and by some hath been thought the only one. But as the words of the prohibition fairly comprehend swearing to trifles also; and as the oldest translations, and most learned of the *Jewish* writers have understood them to comprehend it; and especially, as our Saviour hath established this latitude of the phrase by his own interpretation of it; we are certainly to consider them as taking in both senses. I shall therefore treat of this commandment, first as forbidding false oaths; and afterwards, as forbidding needless and common ones.

Now oaths are of two sorts: either such as affirm or deny somewhat concerning past or present matters, and are called assertory: or such as engage and give assurance concerning time to come, and are called promissory. To begin with the former.

If ever we assert any thing upon oath, which we know or believe to be false: if we deny any thing, which we know or believe to be true: if we either affirm, or deny, in matters of which we know nothing: or if, in matters of which we do know something, we speak beyond our knowledge; declaring ourselves to be certain of what we only believe; or to believe firmly what we only suspect and guess: every one of these things, in its different degree, is profaning the name of God to attest a falsehood. And farther, if, when we are sworn to tell the whole truth, we conceal designedly any part of it, which we think may be of moment, here again we are guilty of breaking our oath. Nay indeed, though we are not sworn to tell the whole, yet we should observe, that the only reason of giving evidence at all is, that right may be done; and suppressing a truth, may sometimes as intirely mislead and deceive, as telling the grossest falsehood. In short then, if we use any method whatever, be it aggravating, or be it palliating, to disguise

guise the real state of the case: if we relate it in any other manner whatever, than the fairest and plainest we can, after diligently recollecting and considering well; every such artifice amounts to a violation of this great law of God.

And if witnesses ought to observe such impartiality; you will easily apprehend, that jurymen and judges are at least equally bound to it: for they are not only upon oath too, but appointed, and intrusted by public authority: and if any thing influences them but a steady regard to truth; what should be the security of justice, becomes an instrument of oppression: *Judgment*, as the scripture expresses it, *is turned into gall; and the fruit of righteousness into hemlock* *. Indeed, whoever hath sworn to speak and determine uprightly, and permits himself to be any way biassed; though he should happen to do right, yet since he was disposed to have done the same thing, though it had been wrong, is perjured in his intention, though in the particular fact he may not.

And greatly akin to the guilt of being perjured ourselves, nay, often as bad, and sometimes worse, if possible, is that of inducing others to be perjured: a sin which is committed, not only by direct hiring of them to swear falsehoods; but by awing and intimidating; by courting and flattering; by intimating advantages to them, if they can truly swear so and so; by talking them into a persuasion of what they were not fully persuaded of before; and thus making them strain hard to believe, that they know or remember more or less than they do. Another way, and a very wicked one, of making witnesses forswear themselves, is, when artful men contrive that they shall use forms of words, of which they do not thoroughly understand the import: or disconcert them so, on their appearance in a court of justice, by improper treatment of them; and astonish and confound them in such a manner, by a multiplicity of captious questions; that they hinder them from speaking the truth which they intended, or drive them into saying falsehoods which they did not intend.

And if it be sinful, by any such methods, to make witnesses bear false testimony: it cannot be innocent, by unfair suggestions, and false colours put on facts or laws, to procure a wrong verdict or sentence. Let any one suppose himself a sufferer by unjust representations of a case, and he will strong-

Z z 2

ly

* Amos vi. 12.

ly feel how bad they are. Surely then he cannot indeed think them allowable, merely because he is a gainer by them.

It is very true, that in all these matters which I have mentioned, sometimes interest, sometimes prepossession, blinds people to a strange degree. But therefore it is their duty, and should be their business, to watch themselves : for no inducement whatever can justify speaking or acting against truth. Be it affection ever so well grounded, be it resentment ever so just, be it zeal for a party, civil or religious, which we think it ever so needful to support ; be it respect for the great and powerful, compassion for the poor and distressed ; be it in a word, what it will, that turns men aside in judgment from justice and equity ; he who testifies or determines on such motives, testifies or determines against his oath. And because men are often influenced by these things, without seeing it distinctly ; whoever is called upon to bear any part in judicial affairs, ought to examine himself before-hand with due care ; and purify his heart from whatever dispositions may corrupt his integrity.

But there are some occasions on which doing so is peculiarly requisite. If, for instance, a case, depending at present, may be likely to prove our own case hereafter, or even appears to have any connection with it : we are strongly tempted to incline a little, perhaps more than a little, to the side that makes for us ; and imagine there cannot be much harm in that : whilst yet we hold those in the utmost abhorrence, who are but equally partial on the other side. And if we have any motive, that looks of a more generous kind ; if it may promote a good cause, if it may serve a friend, or a neighbour, if it may relieve in what seems a hard case ; then we are apt to think it meritorious to transgress. But indeed no cause is so good, as that of a constant adherence to truth and right : and if we depart from it, for what we imagine a valuable end ; we teach and provoke others to depart from it, for what they imagine such : and God knows then who may prove the greatest sufferers at last. As for the plea of good nature on these occasions, it is never a true good nature. For, in all trials of property, shewing any undue favour to one side, is doing just so much hardship to the opposite : and in all trials for crimes, whatever is unfairly done for the advantage of the person accused, is done equally to the disadvantage of public order and safety.

safety. And though possibly both some cases and laws may seem and be hard ones; yet this is the concern of the legislative and regal authority, not ours: and though it be very laudable to obtain, if we can by proper means, a mitigation of the sentence, and even a change of the law itself, when it is requisite; we can never be at liberty, while it continues in force, to elude and defeat it, by false evidence or wrong determinations. If we were, every one's fancy would soon become the rule of his whole behaviour.

There is indeed one thing, that looks a little plausible, urged in favour of such practices; but it may be urged, as well, for almost any sort of dishonesty in the world: that if we scruple a small matter of unfairness, our adversaries will not; and if they take all advantages, we must too; else we are not upon even ground. But in general, sincerity and integrity, with a moderate share of prudence, will do more than set us on even ground. *He that walketh uprightly, walketh surely* *. His method of acting will be consistent, his character will be his advocate and evidence: whilst artful knavery will only entangle and discredit itself. But when this proves otherwise, as it sometimes may: our true wisdom is, to be content it should: to support ourselves with the testimony of a good conscience; and look forward to the approaching hour, when it shall be amply rewarded.

Such then is our duty with respect to oaths, in every part of judicial proceedings: and performing it faithfully is a matter of such unspeakable importance, to the fortunes, the reputations, the liberties, the lives of men, that all ages and nations have shewn a strong sense of it, and made provision accordingly. The Jewish law hath expressly directed: *If a false witness rise up against any man, to testify against him that which is wrong: then shall ye do unto him, as he had thought to have done unto his brother, and thine eye shall not pity* †. The laws of some other countries indeed have not gone so far: yet the mildest have shewn a detestation, both of perjured evidences and perjured judges. And however penalties, enacted by men, may be avoided; the judgments denounced by God cannot: whose word hath declared: *A false witness shall not be unpunished; and he, that speaketh lies, shall not escape* ‡. *Wo unto them,*
that

* Prov. x. 9.

† Deut. xix. 16, 19, 21.

‡ Prov. xix. 5.

*that justifieth the wicked for reward ; and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him * . He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are an abomination to the Lord † .*

If indeed men give false evidence without designing it, through unavoidable mistake or forgetfulness ; they deserve compassion, and not censure. And if they should fail a little in the due care of recollecting ; or even should be a little warped by unperceived prejudices : this, though highly blameable, falls very short of deliberate perjury. And the more dreadful that crime is, the more cautious we should be, not only of committing it ourselves, but of imputing it rashly to our neighbours. Let us therefore so judge one another, as remembering that God will judge us all.

I shall only add, under this head, that assertions upon oath, which are not before a magistrate, but in a private way between two parties, though there is very seldom occasion for them ; yet, whenever we do make them, require, as much as others, the strictest veracity : and will subject us to equal punishment, though not from our fellow-creatures, yet from our Maker, if we employ them to mislead those whom we profess to inform.

The second sort of oaths, mentioned in the beginning, are promissory ones : by which we give assurance of our doing, or abstaining from such and such things hereafter. Now these again are scarce ever needful, and consequently scarce ever allowable, excepting where the law of God or man prescribes them. But when they are taken, their obligation is not at all the less for their being taken unnecessarily. And therefore let us inquire how far it extends. In the first place then, men forswear themselves, whenever they swear to do any thing which they know they cannot do ; as for instance, to execute an office, for which they are sensible they have not abilities or leisure. Indeed, if they only believe they cannot, or have no sufficient reason to think they can, and yet absolutely and unconditionally swear that they will, their oath is plainly deceitful ; and may occasion pernicious disappointments in the affairs, with which, on the credit of it, they are intrusted. Nor doth it acquit them, if unexpectedly they should afterwards prove
able

* 1st v. 21, 23.

† Prov. xvii. 15.

able to do, what they thought at the time they were not : as on the other hand, it doth not make men guilty, if they should not prove able to do, what they had grounds to think they were : for in every thing human, allowance is made of course for some degree of uncertainty, and therefore needs not always be expressed. Again, if we promise any thing upon oath, which though we can do, we do not firmly intend to do, this is very gross perjury : for our own intentions we could not but know, and therefore it is wilful wickedness to swear contrary to them. Nay, lastly, how well soever we might once intend, if we are wanting at any time afterwards in due care to make our promise good, we violate our engagement. For we give assurance, not only of our present purpose, but of our future endeavours too : and therefore of our actual performance, if we have it in our power. So far as indeed we have not, our obligation ceases ; or rather, is suspended, whilst the incapacity continues. For if ever we become able to do, what before we were not ; and the circumstances of the case remain at all the same, as when we obliged ourselves ; undoubtedly we are still obliged.

But suppose we have sworn to do a thing, which is within our power, but contrary to our duty ; what is incumbent on us then ? Why, certainly taking such an oath, knowing or even suspecting it to be such, was a great sin. But performing it, instead of atoning for that sin, would only add a second, and perhaps, in some respects, a greater to it. We have promised what we had no right to promise, and a prior engagement to observe the laws of God, renders this void from the beginning. But then, if only some part or circumstance of it be unlawful, we are firmly bound to perform the rest : indeed to come as near the whole, as, consistently with other duties, we can : and make as good amends, as we are able, to those who may innocently suffer by our failure.

You will easily apprehend from this, that if we have promised any thing upon oath, which we can do lawfully, but cannot do without forfeiting some considerable advantage, or undergoing some considerable expence or loss ; we are by no means absolved from it on that account. For it is a known part of the character of the man, *who shall dwell in the tabernacle of the Lord, and rest upon his holy hill ; that he sweareth to his neighbour, and disappointeth him not, though it were to his*
his

his own hindrance *. If indeed we were not of sufficient understanding, when we made the promise; if we were deceived or mistaken in any thing essential to it; if it was not originally intended to bind us in circumstances, like those which have happened since, though perhaps they were not particularly expected beforehand: if any one of these things be undeniably true, we are not bound. Again, if the person, to whom we have engaged ourselves, release us; or if, where we cannot expect an express notification that he doth, there be full reason to presume it, then also we are at liberty. And this last is the case of some vows to God. We ought to make none rashly: but such as we have made we ought to keep; unless we have ground to think it is not his will that we should. And we ought to suppose it is his will, if they neither contradict any of our duties in life, nor on the whole increase our temptations: above all, if they help us to abstain from sin, and improve in virtue. But if our vow be absurd, and unworthy of him to whom we offer it; fitted only to load us with difficulties, and ensnare us into transgressions; nor is likely ever to have any better effect: and if this be not merely the language of our inclinations, but the dictate of our best judgment, and that of other serious and able persons; we may well conclude, it was never accepted and ratified by our Maker, but on the contrary displeasing to him: and therefore is neither necessary, nor proper to be observed by us. But if, in any of these cases abovementioned, any real cause of doubt appear, the punctual and disinterested side is ever the safest. For to him that *despiseth the oath, and breaketh the covenant, thus saith the Lord God: as I live, surely mine oath that he hath despised, and my covenant that he hath broken, I will recompence it upon his own head* †.

Such then is the obligation of promissory oaths: into which obligation we all enter, though not in common legal form, yet in real effect, by the vow of our baptism, and we acknowledge it by every subsequent act of religion. Every time therefore that we worship God, or in any other way profess ourselves to be Christians, we bind ourselves to every act of Christian duty. But, to speak only of worldly affairs: they, in the first place, are under this tie, who promise faith and allegiance, as
good

* Psal. xv. 1, 5.

† Ezek. xvii. 18, 19.

good subjects to the king. If any doubt of his title to it, they ought to apply for what they may soon have, better instruction. If they remain unsatisfied, they ought to refuse the oath: and if they do so on a principle of conscience, though an erroneous one, they deserve pity and esteem. But whoever takes it contrary to his belief, and contrary to his intention, is a profligate.

In the next place, they ought frequently to consider the nature of this obligation, who have promised due execution of justice, as magistrates: faithful discharge of their trust, as officers: diligence in teaching and exemplary lives, as ministers of God's word. And lastly, it extends to all, who in their private capacity solemnly engage themselves to each other, either in the more important relations of life, particularly that nearest one of marriage; or indeed on any occasion whatever. For though some occasions may be much too slight to justify an oath; yet, when we have given it, the Lord is witness, if we fail to perform according to the words we have spoken.

And now it must be observed further, concerning all oaths, that they are ever to be taken in their plain sense, and that in which we are understood to take them: for to have any other in reserve, is only to mislead and deceive, under pretence of giving information and assurance. If the oath be a voluntary one, which we have framed ourselves; it can have no ambiguity, but what is of our own making: and if we make it on purpose to take advantage of it, we are deliberately and shockingly wicked. Indeed when the words are prescribed us by others, by authority for instance, if they are fairly capable of two senses, and it no way appears which was meant, we may certainly use them in either. But this will very seldom happen: and to invent forced and strained interpretations, to evade binding ourselves whilst we seem to do it, is, if possible, worse of the two, than flat perjury without any evasion: for he is undoubtedly the most thorough sinner, who is so with the most art and contrivance.

Some perhaps may imagine, that on certain occasions, oaths are become, by custom, insignificant. And it must be owned, that custom frequently alters the sense of expressions in common conversation; and sometimes brings them by degrees to be mere words of course. But solemn assertions or promises, above all upon oath, are much too serious affairs to have their

meaning changed, or sunk into nothing, by the caprice and fancy of the world, which governs in trifling talk. Appealing to God, in the nature of the thing, can never be a matter of form only. And the more there are, who, in any case, treat it as such; the more there are, whom *the Lord will not hold guiltless* *. For when this awful tie is once come to be carelessly and habitually broken, in any one instance, be it what it will, there is a broad way set open, to break it in every other. And though, for a while, men may forswear themselves without fear on one occasion, and yet scruple it on another; they will soon discover, that the difference cannot be exceeding great: and accordingly, first one step farther will be taken, then another; they that see this, will imitate and go beyond it; and at length general confusion will be the consequence. For we cannot subsist without placing confidence in each other: and the firmest bond of confidence are oaths. If therefore they lose their credit, mutual trust will cease, or become as pernicious as mutual diffidence; and mischief will follow, without bounds and without remedy.

Nor are these dreadful evils by any means the only aggravation of this sin. Scarce any other affronts and dares God so immediately and directly. For the perjured man renounces his mercy to his face; and openly calls upon him to execute his anger, if he will. Besides, natural inclinations, the growth of our very frame, prompt us to most sins that we commit, and disguise them to our view under specious appearances. But every principle within us, till we stupify them all, revolts at the very thought of perjury. The advantages, that men gain by it, may indeed be extremely pleasing: but they cannot fail to be shocked originally at this manner of gaining them; and therefore, if they use it, must act in full opposition both to their consciences and their hearts. Of other instances of wickedness the world is apt to think very favourably; and indulge and encourage those that practise them. But a man wilfully forsworn is an object of universal abhorrence. He deserves to be so in all cases: he is so in most: and if in any, a person, that is known to be such, can be looked on with the same eye as his neighbours; just in the degree that this prevails, human society tends to a dissolution.

Every

* Exod. xx. 7.

Every member of it therefore is concerned to express his detestation of so impious and destructive a crime. Law-makers ought to enact the most effectual provisions against it: magistrates ought to put them in execution, with peculiar vigour: and every method should be taken, to render the very imagination of such wickedness alarming to men. One method of unspeakable use, would be, to administer oaths with great solemnity; a thing shamefully neglected amongst us: another, of which we are equally unmindful, to appoint as few of them as possible. Oaths, given and taken frequently, will be given and taken irreverently; till at last multitudes will regard them very little more than they do common swearing in their daily conversation. But especially they should be spared, where if they are not, interest will be perpetually tempting men to use them falsely, or procure others to do it in their stead. Else great numbers will be drawn into a dreadful sin, of which otherwise they would never have thought; and being conscious to themselves of having often transgressed so sacred an obligation, will make less difficulty of transgressing others also. The intent of subjecting men to such oaths, will be answered very imperfectly and unequally: the bad will be gainers by perjury; and the good be put under heavy disadvantages, perhaps be ruined, because they dare not incur the same guilt. These are plain reasons why swearing should never be required by law from those, whose property, or any other favourite interest, is concerned, if it can be avoided.

Yet still, when such oaths are prescribed, though unnecessarily and imprudently, it may be impossible for either business or justice to go on, unless they are administered. But both scripture and common reason dictate, that no one ought to take them, who cannot do it with the utmost sincerity. And therefore if our state of life be such, that we cannot refuse them without suffering by the refusal, we must either change it for another, not liable to the same inconvenience; or bear patiently what a good conscience brings upon us, and a good God will reward us for.

I must not conclude, without begging you to observe, that the rules, which have been laid down, concerning assertions and promises on oath, hold good concerning other assertions and promises too: and how crying a sin soever falsehood is in the former, falsehood in the latter is the very next to it; hath

the same bad effects of destroying faith and trust amongst men, though in somewhat a lower degree ; and the opportunities for it are so much more frequent, that a liar, who never swore in his life, may, by often repeating this lesser crime, be more guilty on the whole, than even the perjured wretch, whom perhaps he holds in abhorrence. Remember then, that whether you call upon God to be witness of what you say, or not, he is witness. And it is presumptuous wickedness, to utter an untruth in the presence of the God of truth. For *lying lips are abomination to the Lord : but they that deal truly, are his delight* *.

* Prov. xii. 22.

S E R M O N X X X I I I .

ON OATHS.

EXOD. xx. 7.

Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain ; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless, that taketh his name in vain.

I HAVE already observed to you from these words, that the phrase of *taking the name of God in vain*, strictly translated, expresses taking and joining it to *vanity* : and that *vanity* in scripture language means either what is not, or what, being of small consequence, may be considered as if it were not. So that the prohibition of swearing in vain, or to vanity, comprehends both swearing to what hath no truth in it, and to what is of no sufficient importance. Having therefore laid before you the nature and guilt of the former of these crimes, I shall now speak of the latter ; and shew you the sinfulness of oaths, and imprecations, and every thing approaching towards them, in common discourse. I am very sensible, that scarce any thing can be said on this subject, but what you have often heard, and know perfectly well beforehand. And it is a great aggravation of mens wickedness, that they will transgress, where they cannot plead ignorance. Perhaps there never was a preacher yet, that hath not publicly warned his hearers against profane swearing : perhaps there never was a person guilty of it, that hath not been told of his fault in private too. Yet how little the effect hath been, your own ears may inform you so abundantly every day, that no one can imagine it needless to say more on this head. Useless indeed they may apprehend it will prove to great numbers. But were that a reason for being

ing silent on any point of doctrine, think with yourselves, (and a sad thought it is) what one point would there remain for us to speak upon? Undoubtedly we should preach the word of God with much more comfort, if we saw a prospect of doing it with more success. But be our hope of that ever so low, we must preach every part of it; and you must regard, or disregard it, as you please, and take the consequences. Our commission is the same with that of the prophet: *Son of man, go unto the children of thy people and speak my words unto them, and tell them, thus saith the Lord God, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear* *. Did only the lower part of mankind use his name irreverently; yet they are the bulk of mankind; and their present and future happiness ought to be of as much concern to themselves, and to us, as that of their betters. But if their betters also rival them, often but too successfully, in the shocking competition of profane language; if that sex, on whom it fits the worst, are not intirely free from it; and even those persons, who are seldom guilty of it themselves, by no means take sufficient care to restrain it in others; the necessity of giving frequent cautions against it from the pulpit becomes proportionably greater.

In discharge of this obligation therefore, I beg you to observe concerning all such expressions,

I. That God hath absolutely forbidden them.

II. That there are many strong reasons why he should.

III. That *Heathens*, as well as *Jews* and *Christians*, have condemned them.

IV. That no plea of any weight can be made in favour of them.

V. That all may, if they will, easily abstain from them.

Were all men disposed as they ought to be, one should think it might be enough of itself, that our Maker hath absolutely forbidden the unnecessary use of his name. The words of the text are extremely plain: you hear them read every Lord's day: and you pray to him as often as you hear them, that he would *incline your hearts to keep this law*. Then the words of our blessed Lord in the gospel, are so exceeding strong against needless oaths, that rather than not condemn them effectually, he hath chosen to speak, as if he condemned all oaths. And
for

for imprecations, no precept in the world ever was more express, than that of the apostle against them : *Bless and curse not* *. What shall we say then ? Do we allow, that God hath a right to rule us, or do we deny it ? You will not say, he cannot forbid common swearing and cursing : and surely, if he can, he hath. You will not say, that this sort of language is a duty : why then do not the prohibitions of scripture make it a sin ? Suppose you could perceive no manner of harm in the practice, doth not God know better ? And is it no harm to do, what he hath said you shall not do ? Suppose he intends it only for a trial and exercise of your obedience : is that a reason, why you should disobey ? Would you bear that a child or a servant should treat you so ? And can it be fit treatment then of the Father and Lord of all ? Surely, when once his will is declared, that alone may be sufficient to regulate our behaviour ; and it doth not look well to be very exact in demanding to know why, before we submit.

However, that you may see this obligation in a yet fuller light ; and that religion may suffer no imputation of imposing arbitrary commands in the present case ; I proceed to shew you,

II. That there are strong reasons for the precept now before us : which you will soon discern, if you think but a little of the nature and tendency of the manner of speaking, which it forbids. God is a Being, to whom the very highest of his creatures owe all possible regard and honour. And certainly our low condition and many sins, ought not to lessen, but increase it. Both our virtue, and our happiness here and hereafter, depend on preserving sacredly in our minds a veneration for our Creator, such as may influence every action and thought. Can it then be allowable to intermix *his holy and reverend name* † with all the trifles and all the follies, of our common talk : to use that as an instrument for venting our sinful anger, for confirming every idle assertion we are pleased to utter, for making our discourse appear more lively and humorous ? Can it be fit, we should embellish every silly and affected exclamation of ours with the name of God and his Christ ; and introduce the mention of his meritorious death, of the wounds which he received, and the blood which he shed, for our redemption, on such shameful occasions, as men daily do ? Think only, what sort
of

* Rom. xii. 14.

† Psal. cxi. 9.

of things they are, to which you sometimes hear the Lord of heaven and earth invoked to be a voucher: Things, which men would be ashamed to hint at in the presence of an earthly superior: and yet the great God is called upon, familiarly and without scruple, to attend to them; called upon sometimes to bear witness, that we resolve to do, what we know he hath forbidden on pain of hell-fire. Be assured he is a witness, and will be an avenger too. *The Lord our God is a jealous God**. And he cannot suffer the honour of that name to be prostituted thus, which he hath commanded us to pray may be sanctified and *ballowed*.

Should he permit it, piety and virtue would be lost from off the earth. For if men make free in this manner with the most sacred of all things; talk of God and his terrors in jest; and call down his wrath, in this world and the next, on themselves and one another, for nothing, some of them almost as often as they speak; what possibility is there, that any real sense of duty should remain amongst them? Did you ever know a common swearer, that was in earnest religious! It cannot be. Either the fear of God will keep him from this practice, or this practice will wear out of his mind the fear of God. That awfulness, which surrounds and guards religion, will be turned into scorn, by taking such liberties with the most important articles of it. Consider: to swear is to acknowledge the perfections of God, to pay him an act of worship and homage. Oaths are consecrated by him to serve, on fit occasions, to this purpose only. What a crime must it be then, to debase them to such mean and vile uses, as multitudes do! Suppose any other act of worship were treated in the same manner, and profaned every hour, carelessly, and even in mockery; how would this appear to you, and what must the consequence be? Now let such impiety be as shocking as it will; that of common swearing is in its nature full as shocking: and it is dreadful, that men are so habituated to it, as not to feel it.

But farther: when men are once grown fearless enough to break this known and plain law of duty; what principles have they to deter them from breaking any other? When the reverence of God is so effaced from their hearts, that they can use his name with disregard and contempt; what hope or thought

* Exod. xx. 5.

thought can there be left in them of pleasing him? and where then is the security of their not going on to offend him by whatever additional sins they chance to like? Undoubtedly there are those who will swear, and yet will not commit some other sorts of wickedness. But there are few, if any perhaps, that will swear, and yet will commit no other sort of wickedness. And there are many, that began with this transgression only; but when once the breach in their conscience was made, it soon widened, and they admitted through it by degrees, all the vileness in the world. He therefore, that would not expose himself to become profligate in all respects, must beware of becoming so in this. And they, that would not have their children or servants scruple nothing, must take care they shall scruple swearing. For this is generally one of the first steps which they take towards complete worthlessness. And they go on afterwards much the faster, for another reason. While they dislike profane language, they are unqualified for profane company. Execrations and blasphemies make them tremble, and keep them at a distance from the abandoned. But if these things lose their horror, that barrier is removed, and they are easily drawn in to contract intimacies with those, who often *make them*, in a little time, as our Saviour expresses it, *two-fold more the children of hell, than themselves* *.

Thus doth common swearing lead to all wickedness: but it leads peculiarly to that of false swearing. *In a multitude of words*, the wise man observes, *there wanteth not sin* †. And in a multitude of oaths, there will never want perjury. The less of it any one runs into, who throws the name of God out of his mouth at random, the greater his good fortune is: but as the boldest swearers are almost constantly the freest talkers too; and call heaven to witness the most plentifully, just at those times when they speak with the least consideration and government of their tongues; they cannot avoid being guilty of false oaths perpetually. And let any one of them speak his conscience, he must own he hath been perjured a thousand times. Perhaps he will plead, that he was not in earnest. And were that always true, though I believe it is not, far from it, in any one such person's case in the world; yet is perjury a matter to jest with? Are invocations of God, solemn vows and

* Matth. xxiii. 15.

† Prov. x. 19.

imprecations, things for men to cast wantonly around them, and say, *Am I not in sport* *? Remember, he, with whom you take these liberties, hath made no allowance for them in his word, nor consequently will make any at the great day. The rule of his law is express: *Ye shall not swear by my name falsely; neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the Lord* †. And we have no manner of intimation, that this command is to give way, as often as we think it proper to divert ourselves with transgressing it. Besides, there is but a step, and it is easily made, from swearing falsely in jest, or half earnest, to doing the same thing in downright earnest. Taking oaths too frequently, and with too little solemnity, even before legal officers, is acknowledged to diminish the reverence due to them. What must it do then, to use them continually in common conversation, without any ceremony at all? And how can it be expected, that a man, who, without the least fear of God, or regard to truth, swears a hundred times over to whatever comes uppermost one hour, shall perhaps the very next, (provided you change the scene) become superior to every thing that would corrupt his integrity in bearing testimony? It will doubtless be said to this, that a man's honour sufficiently binds him to veracity, when he gives his solemn oath, let his sense of religion be as little as it will. But what if he can hope to avoid discovery, and save his honour? What if he prefers his interest before his honour? What if he thinks forswearing himself on some occasions, no breach of his honour, perhaps a point of honour? What shall bind him then, if the fear of profaning God's name doth not? But still, it must be owned, you will say, that many common swearers are men of truth and probity. Why some, we acknowledge, are: and great pity it is, that such as they, will be common swearers. But if this practice doth not lead every one into deliberate perjury, is it not enough, that it leads many, that it tempts and endangers all the rest; and that they cannot know beforehand, how great the danger may, at one time or other prove! He that is swearing and vowing continually, it must happen, that sooner or later, he will swear to do something unlawful. What a snare now is this! It is a sin to have taken such an oath: It is another sin to perform it: and yet it looks extremely like a sin, not to perform it. Still he certainly ought not: but it is
a great

* Prov. xxvi. 19.

† Lev. xix. 12.

a great chance, whether the fear or the shame, of that imaginary sin, may not drive him into the real one. Such probably was the case of *Jeptba*: such undoubtedly was that of *Herod*; who had never been guilty of murdering *John* the Baptist, if he had not first been guilty of swearing inconsiderately. For the evangelists expressly tell us, *the king was exceeding sorry: yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes who sat at meat with him, he sent and beheaded John in the prison* *. Indeed it is a common excuse, that men make for acting, as they are sensible they ought not, and would not else, that they have sworn to do it, and therefore must and will.

But suppose the danger were only that of swearing to do things not unlawful in their nature, but inconvenient and prejudicial to us; it would surely be a sufficient reason against needless oaths. For in that case, unless we be released from our engagement, which we cannot always be, the scripture very justly directs: *If a man vow a vow unto the Lord, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond: he shall not break his word: he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth* †. Is it not then a very wise caution, which *Solomon* gives? *Be not rash with thy mouth: and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God* ‡. For many a time have men lamented through their whole lives, the unhappy consequences of one single oath.

It is very true, we may entangle ourselves by unlawful or imprudent promises, though we do not add this confirmation to them. But yet, oaths are understood to be, and therefore are a much more solemn, strong and irrevocable tie, than mere promises; and consequently make the case just so much the worse. Besides, the same guard upon themselves, that restrains men from swearing rashly, will restrain them also from promising rashly; whereas he, that is ready to pour out oaths on every occasion, is in perpetual danger of binding himself down at once, by the strongest obligation under which he can be laid.

On the whole, therefore, the son of *Sirach's* advice is extremely important. *Hear, O ye children, the discipline of the mouth: He that keepeth it, shall never be taken in his lips. Accustom not thy mouth to swearing; neither use thyself to the naming*
of

3 B 2

* Matth. xiv. 9. 10. Mark vi. 26, 27.

† Numb. xxx. 2.

‡ Eccl. v. 2.

*of the Holy One. For as the servant, that is continually beaten, shall not be without a blue mark : so he, that sweareth and nameth God continually, shall not be faultless. A man, that useth much swearing, shall be filled with iniquity, and the plague shall never depart from his house. If he shall offend, his sin shall be upon him : and if he acknowledge not his sin, he maketh a double offence.—There is a word that is clothed about with death : God grant that it be not found in the heritage of Jacob : for all such things shall be far from the godly *.*

But, besides the sins and dangers which I have hitherto pointed out, consider the matter in another light, and you will see many more, of great moment, attending this practice. The spirit of religion is a spirit of mildness and benevolence. Even the irreligious, if they profess any regard to principle, profess a high esteem for these virtues. And there are few things less consistent with them, than the common use of oaths and imprecations. Cursing is the expression of a heart not satisfied with the mischief that we can and dare inflict ourselves, but that seeks to interest even the great God, in making the person, with whom we are displeased, completely miserable. Recollect but a little the dreadful words that are uttered ; consider a while what things they are, which they who indulge themselves this way, beg of heaven may fall on one another's heads : is it possible for the very fiends to go beyond the rage and malignity of such language ? And let it not be pleaded, that they mean nothing of what they say. They mean often but too much of it, at least for the time ; mean almost always to shew a very sinful wrath and bitterness : and the way, which they take to shew it, inflames it still more. For hardly any thing upon earth blows up anger to so outrageous a vehemence, as venting it in oaths and curses. They rouse up the passion of those who use them : they provoke passion in return from those to whom they are used : and when once the flame, thus kindled, blazes out on both sides, can there be in nature a more hellish spectacle seen or imagined ? But suppose the swearer to be of a calmer disposition ; continually throwing out phrases, of such terrible import, upon all who are about him, cannot fail to lessen whatever humanity he hath, and harden his heart towards them gradually. The least they imply is an immoral
disregard

* Eccles. xxiii. 7,—12.

disregard of what becomes of them. And we shall never preserve that equitable attention to others and their remonstrances, which we certainly ought, if once we get a habit of driving away, with a hasty curse, whoever at any time importunes us with his applications. Common swearers may be, to some persons, and on some occasions, very good-natured men: but on others, they find a threatening oath or two is so very short and easy a way, to get rid of a difficulty, right or wrong, that they often venture on most barbarous behaviour, under this protection: and sometimes, it may be feared, affect such language, merely to screen them from doing their duties, and in particular from paying their debts; or to deceive those with whom they converse; or terrify those whom they cannot deceive.

But besides that oaths and curses are commonly used to support other injuries, they are injuries and outrages themselves. To our superiors they are affronts and indignities: to our equals they are rudeness: and it is a mean-spirited insolence to shew our contempt of those beneath us, by them, for no other reason, than because we know they must bear it. But indeed words of this nature are justly offensive, not only to the persons against whom you direct them, but to all within hearing. For how have they deserved to be made witnesses, whether they will or not, of all the brutalities you are pleased to utter? Even before those who have no religion, such transports must be extremely unbecoming. But remember too, there are some who have religion; whose ears it grates, and whose heart it grieves, as well it may, to hear the commandments of their God transgressed, and his holy name profaned wantonly. Why are not these to have due regard paid them? Why should it not be thought, in a nation professing Christianity, a point of common decency, in all men, to abstain from open violations of Christian precepts? And really, to behave without common decency, above all to the religion of a country, is of itself no small immorality. The other civilities of life are generally kept up, in outward form at least; and often to a great degree of delicacy. Whatever would be displeasing to any one, be the dislike of it ever so fanciful, is carefully avoided: and it is of considerable importance to our happiness to act so. What ground is there then to make an exception in this one case?

And

And why must you treat *the king of all the earth* *, before those who honour him, with that disrespect, which you would not express towards any common person, for whom any of the company present had the least regard? Such behaviour would produce dangerous resentments, on almost every other occasion, from most men. And though real Christians will in no way revenge your treatment of them, but join pity for you with their uneasiness at your discourse; this surely is no reason why you should give them that uneasiness; and much less, why you should purposely single them out to feel it, as I fear is sometimes done. But indeed such conversation must be offensive to all in general, who have any consideration, either of good sense or agreeableness. It is irrational, it is absurd, it excites images that are shocking, it makes men appear like devils, to bring death, and hell, and eternal damnation, into every sentence, let the subject of discourse be what it will. As for the excuse, that these phrases are so familiar, that they make no impression, raise no ideas; there was a time at least, nor could it be a short one, when they did: and in proportion as the meaning of such words is thus effaced and lost, I doubt all concern about the things, that once were meant, is effaced and lost too; and solicitude to obtain everlasting happiness, or escape everlasting misery, worn out of mens hearts. Yet still, God be thanked, there are some remaining, to whom profane language carries its original terror: and, for their sakes, if for no other reason, it ought to be avoided. But far from that, they themselves, who alledge this plea of its being insignificant, seldom fail to confute it, by inventing new oaths and curses, as fast as ever they can, to alarm and awe those that hear them, for fear the old ones should have lost the power of doing it. And thus their language becomes every day more and more diabolical, till such kind of expressions make up perhaps near half of what some of them say. Now were each of these offences, taken singly, much lighter than it is; yet how enormous a weight of sin must the incessant repetition of them amount to, in the course of a man's life; and how heavy may it press on his conscience, when he comes to die! Then besides, it is a crime of public scandal, and bad example: you may lead great numbers of others into it, or encourage them in it; your acquaintance,

quaintance, your friends, your servants, your children; may contribute largely to their ruin, and share deeply in their guilt. Nay, you may contribute, much more than you think of, to the increase of other wickednesses too; and, by consequence, towards bringing down the judgments of God upon your country. For, let some think as slightly as they will of taking his name in vain, it is a notorious fact, that all manner of crimes grow common and bare-faced along with it: and therefore, in proportion as that increases amongst any people, they gradually ripen for destruction. Accordingly we find the prophet *Jeremiah* declaring expressly, that *because of swearing the land mourneth* *. And *Hosea* puts down that, in the first place, as the leading sin of those many, for which the *Lord* had a controversy with the children of *Israel*. By swearing, and lying, and stealing, and committing adultery, they break out, and blood toucheth blood. Therefore shall the land mourn; and every one, that dwelleth therein, shall languish †. May God in his mercy give us grace to turn ourselves from all our transgressions, that so iniquity may not be our ruin ‡.

* Jer. xxiii. 10. † Hos. iv. 1, 2, 3. ‡ Ezek. xviii. 30.

S E R M O N XXXIV.

ON OATHS.

EXOD. xx. 7.

Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain ; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless, that taketh his name in vain.

I N discoursing on these words, after laying before you the nature and guilt of perjury, I proceeded to treat of rash and needless oaths and imprecations : concerning which I have shewn,

I. That the mere prohibition of scripture is alone sufficient obligation to abstain from them : and yet

II. That the wisdom and goodness of God, in forbidding them, is evident ; as they are plainly inconsistent with a sense of piety and reverence towards him, with the support of truth and justice in the world, with a behaviour of humanity and common decency.

These things being proved, there may seem to be little need of saying any thing further concerning this sin. But as too many are apt to think, either that Christian preachers are led by prejudice to dress it up in false terrors, or that whatever objections there may be against it, there are likewise considerable pleas to be made in its favour ; or, at least, that in certain circumstances men cannot abstain from it : I beg your attention once more to the subject, whilst I prove,

III. That others, as well as Christians, have condemned common swearing.

IV. That the pleas, alledged for it, are of no weight.

V. That, by observing a few plain directions, men may both avoid it, and even cure themselves and others of it.

III. In

III. In speaking to the third head, I might properly remind you of what I mentioned in the first discourse on this subject, that the old *Jewish* teachers condemned oaths, almost as strongly as our Saviour himself: nay, that *Solomon* hath set down the character of *him that sweareth* as a bad one; and of *him that feareth an oath*, as a good one *. But some may possibly except against authorities from these writers, as being of a religion too near akin to our own. Therefore none shall be quoted but heathens. And though their very poets †, and orators ‡, as well as lawgivers and philosophers, have delivered rules, agreeable to those of scripture, on this point; I shall produce only some of the latter. *Rhadamanthus*, the *Cretan* legislator, forbade all swearing directly by the name of God, to preserve it from profanation §. To reverence an oath, is a well known precept of the famous *Pythagoras* ||. And the philosopher *Hierocles*, in his commentary upon it, hath the following words. *This precept requires men, not only to speak truth when they swear, but to abstain from swearing: not to use oaths frequently, and rashly, and about trifles, to fill up a sentence, or confirm a common story. For so shall we observe truth in our oaths, if we be sparing of them: But from frequent swearing to false swearing, is an easy fall. Plato* directs that men do not on slight occasions name God; and scarce on any swear by him ¶. *Avoid oaths*, saith *Epicætetus* **, *if it be possible, intirely: but if not, to the utmost of your power. An oath*, saith his commentator *Simplicius*, *is calling God to witness, and making him a voucher to what we say. Now to introduce God on little and insignificant occasions, expresses a contempt of him.* The earliest of these men were certainly under none of the prepossessions, which it may be fancied we are: and though such of them, as lived after Christ, are much the most explicit and the strongest in condemning all needless oaths, and therefore may be supposed to have learnt their dislike of them from believers in him; yet this only shews, that though they opposed Christianity in general, they were forced to confess

VOL. I.

3 C

fefs

* Eccl. ix. 2.

† *Charilus* and *Menander* in *Grot.* on *Matth.* v. 34 ‡ *Isoc.* ad *Demonic.* § See note * on *Serm.* XXXI. on Oaths, p. 353 ¶ *Aur. Carm.* 2. *Diog. Laert.* also gives this amongst his doctrines. *Diod Sic. Excerpt.* l. 6. p. 555 saith, that *Pythagoras* παρηγγυλε τοις μανθανουσι σπανιος μιν ομνυναι, χρησασμενοις δε τοις ορκοις παντως εμμενειν. ¶ *De Legibus*, L. xi. ** *Ench.* c. 33.

fess the excellency of its doctrine in this particular, and to adopt it. For they say most exactly the same things that we do: nor can any one writer, of any nation upon earth, be produced, that ever said the contrary. All the authority therefore, as well as all the reason in the world, bears testimony to the fitness and importance of God's command in this matter: and what pleas can there be on the other side, to excuse our disobedience? Let us proceed

IV. To consider them.

Some perhaps may imagine, that oaths procure credit to what they say. But are any more credited, than those who never swear in their discourse at all? or any less, than those who swear every moment? This is the way to lower and destroy, not raise your credit. For it seems to imply a voluntary acknowledgement, on your own part, that your mere affirmation is unworthy of regard. You know best indeed, whether it deserves belief or not. But if it doth, you are very unwise to add more. It is considered, as no small privilege allowed to the rank of some persons, that their assertion is admitted without an oath, in legal proceedings on matters of great moment. Why should not you partake of that privilege, as far as you can? Why will you degrade yourself needlessly? If your bare word be in truth a sufficient security, keep up the honour of it; and reserve additional confirmations for occasions of high importance, for such as seldom happen, and where an oath is indispensable. By making them common in every case, you lose the advantage of them in extraordinary cases. It is the character which men preserve, not merely the form of words which they use, that must give weight to what they say. And if your character be sunk, till you raise it again by a right behaviour, all other ways to gain credit will have very little effect. You may join, if you will, the sin of swearing with that of lying; but no one will suspect you the less of the latter, for hearing you guilty of the former. You may try to cloak falsehood with perjury: but you will soon be detected, and doubly abhorred: whereas if you will learn to speak truth, you will never need oaths. But indeed they who make this plea, very often swear and curse, just as freely, in cases where they cannot make it: in saying what no one doubts, in matters not of fact, but of speculative opinion; or matters depend-

ing,

ing, not on their testimony, but that of others; nay, sometimes in the very asking of a question.

Instead of this excuse therefore, a different one is invented; that where this kind of language is not wanted to gain belief, at least it commands respect. But is any one, in reality, ever the better thought of for it, or the worse for want of it? Did you ever hear it said, or intimated, that such a one was a man of no understanding, or no honour, or no consequence, because he was never known to swear; or was a person of singular worth and importance, because he had a greater plenty and variety of oaths than other men? What sort of respect must it be then, that such phrases can procure you? Perhaps you hope to appear terrible by the use of them. But where is the need of appearing so? It should rather be the care of reasonable creatures, to appear mild, and humane, and agreeable to each other. It is true, men in some stations must carry awe with them: but this is not the way to it. Swearing frights none, but those whom it is unmanly to fright: and the affectation of giving much terror is a well-known mark, and commonly, though not always, a true one, of little courage. All the threatening imprecations in the world can only shew, that he who uses them, is an angry man, or would seem so: but as his anger is not in the least of more consequence with them than without them, so it may be shewn full as effectually without them as with them. Nay, very often, such as would submit upon a moderate and decent reproof, are exasperated by the outrage of being sworn at; and it may be, provoked to return the language they receive: in which case, all that superiors get by it, is, teaching their inferiors to curse them to their faces, and throwing down the distinction they meant to keep up. Some indeed are so used to pour out oaths, on all considerable occasions, that they are little minded if they do not: but then they are commonly so used to it, upon inconsiderable ones also, that they are not much more minded if they do. Or however that be, as this pretended necessity of swearing arises wholly from a habit of swearing without necessity; your having been guilty already can never justify your becoming more so. But your plain way is, leave off these wrong methods of making yourself attended to, and apply diligently to the right ones: and after a while, one calm word of command or direction will go a great deal farther, than ever so

much bluster and blasphemy did before. At first indeed you may be under difficulties ; but as your preceding transgressions of your duty have brought them upon you, you must bear them with patience. Or supposing, that not you, but others before you, have so accustomed those, with whom you are concerned, to this language, that they will not easily be kept in order without it : still, which of the two is fitter ; that you should deliberately go on to violate the laws of God, and set all around you an example of it, merely to procure yourself more speedy regard from the profligate ; or that you should keep yourself innocent, and reform them ; the effect of which will be double honour from them for the future ? But after all, the real truth is, that this plea of commanding respect, as well as the former of gaining belief, is, generally speaking, mere pretence : and they who alledge them, swear just as much, when they know they shall get neither.

But there is a third inducement to it, which though not often mentioned, perhaps appears to have with many great weight ; an opinion of its recommending them to the world, as being above precise restraints, of a lively conversation, and graceful behaviour. Now it must be acknowledged, that a free use of oaths will help to acquit them from the imputation of having any religion. Not that men are by any means always so fearless of their Maker, as they give themselves airs of being. And it is surely the lowest of affectations, to make false pretences to a character, which, if it really belonged to them, could only dishonour them. For why they should, any of them, meet with more regard from men, for having no regard to God, and no restraints on their behaviour, but what they may boldly throw off, when it serves a present turn, this is beyond all comprehension. Observe too, that as it is wicked for believers in religion to swear needlessly ; so it is absurd for unbelievers to swear at all ; and very dishonest also, to offer an oath for the confirmation of what they say, when they themselves must look upon it to be no confirmation in the least. As for the notion that oaths give a life and spirit to discourse ; it must be confessed, that the whole spirit of some mens conversation consists in the profaneness of it : and to refuse them full scope in the only thing they have to be admired for, may seem ill-natured. But then it is so very easy to procure all the admiration that swearing can give ; an attainment, which the meanest

meanest and stupidest of human creatures possess often in a supreme degree, that one would think it should not be mightily coveted. If this be all you have to make a figure with, you will make a very poor one. And if you have any thing better to value yourself upon, trust to that: and leave such as have no other, to shine with so cheap an accomplishment; which indeed, of all the follies that ever made any man's conversation despicable and disagreeable, is the very greatest. And to see it in this light; suppose a dialogue were written down, as full of these ornaments as some peoples discourse is, and you were to read it over; what should you think of it? Not only the practice in general would appear monstrously void of all decency and propriety, but the very forms and terms made use of errant gross nonsense. Still, some common swearers may, in other respects, be men of good understanding and good breeding; but their faults must not be taken for excellencies; much less will they look becoming, when copied: and surely their oaths are disgusting, for still further reasons. The assuming air and vehemence, that is inseparable from them, expresses much incivility and disrespect. You never hear them from your inferiors on that very account. And yet, if it be such graceful language, why should not your children and servants accost you with it, on all occasions? But plainly, as long as the phrases of this kind have any meaning, they have a shocking one: and when they have none they are more impertinence, which was never in any other case accounted a beauty. Suppose you were to use in your discourse as many harmless expletives, as you do of these profane ones; would not you be ridiculous, even to a proverb? And yet there are not only no words, but no insignificant or inarticulate sounds and noises, but might, with just as much sense and elegance, be brought into every part of your conversation as the oaths you are so fond of. And surely adding impiety to absurdity, cannot make it less absurdity. One would hope, their being forbidden is not the reason why you delight in them. If it be, think only what a deliberate disobedience to God, and defiance of his authority, that implies. And if it be not, what motive can you have, to let such ugly excrescences deform your talk?

But some alledge, in the fourth place, that whether becoming or not, it is the fashion however, and that must be followed. But though much too common, it is by no means universal.

sal. There are, God be thanked, great numbers innocent of it, yet well esteemed in the world, and the more for their innocence, by all whose esteem is worth having; and so may you. But were the exceptions fewer; must you needs prefer the customs of the world before all common sense, before the dictates of your conscience, before the commands of your Maker? Think a little of the matter. And remember too, the world hath many other bad customs. Is it your intention then, to comply with them all, and be completely profligate? If not, why do you comply with this? Other sins you may be inticed and persuaded into; but no one, I presume, will take much pains in pressing you to curse and swear. And if the practice be looked on by some with too much indulgence, it is looked upon by none with esteem. Such language may perhaps, in former days, long ago, have been one distinction of the upper part of the world: and truly one, that did them little credit, even then: but now, the very lowest of mankind are grown to be so thoroughly their match at it, and the most vulgar mouths have this whole set of phrases in such continual use, that it is high time for well bred men to have done with them. But above all, the most distant advances, towards any sort of profaneness in discourse, should be scrupulously avoided by that sex, which cannot yet plead any established custom for it; and whose esteem from the other depends so very greatly on the gentleness and delicacy of their conversation, that they will be far from finding their account, (whatever they may fancy) in exchanging it for a confident behaviour, and offensive expressions of masculine boldness.

But fifthly; some have yet a different plea to make. It is not the practice of the world that they insist on; but swearing is unhappily become their own practice: and long habit hath made it quite familiar to them, and a thing of course. What you urge therefore, in alleviation of your crime, is, that you have been for very many years very constantly guilty of it. And is not this, on the contrary, one of the greatest aggravations, that can be? Suppose you had lived, as perhaps you have, in the habitual commission of several other sins besides; is that a reason, why you should go on with them all, and be easy about them; or a strong reason, why you should be deeply concerned for them, and set in earnest to amend without delay? But you can alledge, it may be, that you learnt it before you knew the
harm

harm of it ; and indeed were taught it by the example of those, who should have taught you better things. Why undoubtedly their setting you such a pattern was some excuse for you at first : but your following it to this day, and setting others the same, is void of all excuse. And what do you mean to do in the case ? You will not say, that you never design to reform, but will indulge yourself to your dying hour, in what God hath forbidden you. And if not, do you expect, that what custom hath made hard to leave off, longer custom will make easy ? When shall you do it, if not now ? But, very probably, you have one thing farther to plead on this head : that you scarce know when you swear. And supposing this true, what doth it prove, but how great and old a sinner, in this way, you have been ? Men may accustom themselves to many faults, and those very gross ones, till, at last they commit them without reflecting upon it almost at all. But do you think, they may safely commit them for that reason ; or, that they ought to mind better what they do ? And observe, a habit of swearing is the less excusable on this account : because there is nothing in our frame, that originally tempts us to it. Other sins are deeply rooted in the constitution of man ; have much pleasure and profit, at least great appearances of it, frequently attending them : profane language hath neither. Still, we are not to indulge even the vices, that are born with us : but much less one, to which nature doth not prompt us ; and which therefore we may, if we will, very easily, both avoid at first, and lay aside afterwards. A little attention is almost the whole we need for the cure : and surely our Maker hath a right to this from us. The greatest swearer that ever was, can abstain from oaths in the presence of those, before whom he thinks them improper ; and can expect, that his inferiors should abstain from them in his presence, be they ever so much addicted to them. Why then is not the presence of God to be equally revered ? And what impossibility is there, of paying as great a regard to him, as we do to one another ? The force of habit therefore, though a powerful motive to beware of falling into this sin, is no argument at all for continuing in it.

There is yet remaining a sixth, and the last plea I shall mention, made by some for themselves, that they do not swear commonly ; scarce ever indeed, but when they are provoked, and passion gets the better of them. Now this, it must be owned,

is

is a strong temptation, and therefore they hope no small excuse. But consider: it is only custom which hath made it a temptation: a person, who had not learnt to swear at such times, would never think of it. Besides, is every one to be excused for doing every thing that his passions tempt him to? We have many other passions, as well as anger, that tempt us to do ill. If one makes a sin excusable, why not another? And where shall we stop? But even as to this passion; suppose a murderer should plead, that he never killed a man in cold blood, but only when he was angry; would this avail him? When men are moved by resentment, are they to give it full scope? are they to vent it in every way they please? especially in such ways, as must increase it? For were you desirous to excite rage within yourself to the very utmost, what could you do more effectual, than blow up the flame by vehement oaths and imprecations? You find therefore, that St. *James*, writing to persons, who suffered under very provoking ill usage, gives them particularly this caution: *But above all things, my brethren, swear not* *. Undoubtedly, being surprised by sudden warmth, and hurried at once into a sin, is some mitigation of it. But you cannot say you are surprised into what you are constantly ready to practise, as often as any incitement to it comes in your way. Instead therefore of seeking excuses for doing wrong in this matter; seek, what are the best means to enable you to do right. And for your assistance in it, I now proceed to the

V. Head proposed: which was to give some plain directions for the prevention or cure of this great fault.

And, in the first place, to avoid swearing in anger, avoid being in anger: keep your temper even and composed, by all the considerations, that reason and religion can suggest. Or, if you cannot help being ruffled, and feel that improper expressions are struggling for utterance, oblige yourself to silence; utter nothing at all, turn aside, and quit the company for a while, if there be need: for thus, in all likelihood, you will escape more sins and dangers than one. But, to secure you farther at all times: Recollect frequently what you have heard and read and been convinced of, concerning this practice; the impiety, the mischievousness, the indecency, the contemptibleness

* James. v. 12.

ness of it ; with the utter vanity of the excuses alledged for it. But above all, possess your heart with a serious regard to God : think of him often and reverently ; and you will soon cease to mention him irreverently. Have it ready upon your mind ; he, that hath said, *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain*, hath said also, *The Lord will not hold him guiltless, that taketh his name in vain* : he that hath said, *Swear not at all* *, hath said also, *If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments* †. Further yet : abstain as much as possible, from all company, that will set you the example of profane language : and be assured, that keeping yourself innocent in this respect will by no means be the only benefit you will receive from that caution. But if you must converse with such, be doubly on your guard before them ; and if they attempt to ridicule your strictness, give your reasons, where there is hope of doing good : where there is none, endeavour to turn the discourse, and hear as little upon the subject, as you can : but what you must hear, bear it mildly, and resolutely. One should think, it might suffice men to dishonour God themselves, without driving others, by scoffs and railleries, to do it against their will. But if such treatment doth befall you ; remember always, what your Lord and Master hath declared : *Whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, in this adulterous and sinful generation ; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels* ‡. But *whosoever shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father, which is in heaven* §. At the same time, endeavour to shelter yourself under the protection, and good counsel, of some prudent and serious friend. Surely you are not so unhappy as to have none. If you are, it is high time you made one. Let him encourage, and watch over your innocence ; let him remonstrate to you, if you become guilty. And in that case, acknowledge your sense of the fault before any fit persons, that hear you commit it ; authorize them to remind you of it ; these things will tie you down to avoid it. Or, if more be needful, lay a penalty upon yourself for each offence : do some act of mortification, or of charity, to fix the sense of your transgression deeper in your mind. And make it a rule, to abstain, not on-

* Matth. v. 34.

† Matth. xix. 17.

‡ Mark viii. 38.

§ Matth. x. 32.

ly from the more shocking oaths and imprecations, but from palliating them under silly disguises; or using others in their stead, that are gentler: for besides that they will lead you to worse, they are bad in themselves. Our Saviour you know expressly forbids swearing *by heaven, by the earth*, by any of the pretended harmless forms: and gives a reason for it, which a heathen writer, who lived after him, gives too; that though none of them named God, they all of them referred to him*. They can have no other sense: and he will understand them in this. Indeed expressions, which taken strictly may not be oaths, yet if they bear the resemblance of oaths, ought to be shunned as *appearances of evil*†: for whoever goes as near as he can, towards sin; will seldom fail of making one step farther, and falling into it. Nay, any careless, and especially ludicrous mention of God in discourse, be it ever so remote from swearing, is undeniably *taking his name in vain*: and irreverent conversation about any part of religion, or any thing connected with it, always brings on some degree of disregard to its ever blessed Author and Object.

When once, by these or better directions, you have reformed yourself; you may hope for success in the farther duty of preserving others innocent: which till then you will attempt with an exceeding ill grace. And surely it must be a mortifying situation, that men dare not blame their very children for swearing, because the reproof would fly back into their own faces. It is reported indeed, that there are parents, who can rejoice in their children's giving this early proof of manliness. And truly they had need rejoice while they can. For such an education will soon bring forth other fruits, besides this, that will turn their mirth into heaviness enough. And then they will exclaim, and pretend to wonder, that the poor wretches come out to be, what they have made them. Such, as would be happy in their children, must lay a foundation for it early. And if to conduct them right, it be necessary to reform the rest of your family, and yourselves too, it is only a double reason for doing so, instead of an objection against it.

But indeed most, if not all men, may go, at least occasionally, much farther; and check profane language in other places, besides,

* Ulpian saith, that they who use such forms, *respectu divini nominis jurant*.

† 1 Thess. v. 22.

sides their own homes. A mere look of surprise, disapprobation, or sorrow, on hearing it, will often have a great effect. And without the least violation of good manners, but treating those with much regard, who are pleased to treat God with none, various methods may be found of sometimes plainly declaring, sometimes obliquely intimating, the manifold wrongness of such expressions. There is indeed one thing, that would seem to be of this kind, and hath a contrary effect: I mean, when swearers are chid absolutely in jest; in a way that makes it visible, they are not in the least worse thought of; and they perhaps carry on the jest, by begging pardon of the company, and doing the same thing again the next minute; without having it once brought to their thoughts, that they have cause either to beg pardon of God, or be ashamed of themselves. Such a farce of reproof encourages, instead of discountenancing, the sin. But a real and serious dislike, shewn with discretion, and requisite mildness, may do incredible service, to young offenders above all. And therefore, whoever wishes well to his acquaintance, and friends, to religion and virtue; especially, whoever hath any peculiar ground to hope he may have weight; should conscientiously make use of every opportunity for promoting right behaviour, in this and all respects: knowing, that *he, who converteth a sinner from the error of his way, shall save a soul from death, and shall bide a multitude of sins* *.

* James v. 20.

S E R M O N X X X V .

ON THE DECEITFULNESS OF SIN.

2 SAM. xii. 13.

*And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord.
And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away
thy sin : thou shalt not die.*

IN holy scripture, not only the great and good actions of pious persons are *written for our learning* *, that we may admire, and, as far as we are concerned, imitate them ; but their chief transgressions also are recorded, for a caution to be on our guard, and a direction, if, like them, we have done amiss, like them, to repent and reform. Amongst all the instances of this kind, there is none more fruitful of instruction, than that well-known history of *David's* being seduced from a religious course of life to most dreadful wickedness, and continuing regardless of his guilt, till the prophet *Nathan* at length having awakened him to a sense of it, by a home application of the parallel case of the poor man and the ewe lamb, brought him to the confession, and administered to him the comfort expressed in the text.

There are many circumstances in this narration, which may and ought to remind us of truths, in which we are too nearly interested. But the principal of them will be comprehended, if we learn from it the following points of doctrine.

I. That, without continual care, the best of men may be led into the worst of crimes.

II. That

* Rom. xv. 4.

II. That we are all very apt to overlook our own faults, and yet to be extremely quick-fighted and severe in relation to those of others.

III. That as soon as ever we are, by any means, made sensible of our offences, we should acknowledge them with due penitence.

IV. That on doing this, the greatest sins will be forgiven us. Yet,

V. That sins, even after they are forgiven, frequently produce such lamentable consequences, that, on this account, amongst others, innocence is greatly preferable to the truest repentance.

I. That, without continual care, the best of men may be led into the worst of crimes.

David, we are told in holy writ, *was a man after God's own heart* *: who *did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, and turned not aside from any thing that he commanded him, all the days of his life, save only in the matter of Uriah the Hittite* †. Such high expressions are never to be interpreted of any mere man in the utmost rigour: but the lowest meaning must be, that he was on the whole, to a very high degree, innocent of known deliberate sin; and exemplary for piety and virtue to the age he lived in: when even they, who in some things were favoured with revelations from above, were in others, being left to their own reason, less enlightened than common Christians are now, and therefore entitled to a more favourable judgment. But independently on this consideration, *David's* eminence in goodness appears from many excellent actions, related throughout the book of *Samuel*: and the *Psalms*, written by him, are everlasting instances of his fervent devotions, his reverent esteem of God's law, his watchfulness over his own spirit. Nay, indeed, there is one instance in which he appears to have been scrupulous even to an extremity of delicacy: when *his heart smote him, that he had cut off the skirt of Saul's garment* ‡. Suppose, now, the prophet *Nathan* had foretold concerning such a man as this, that in a little time he would commit the capital sin of adultery; and, when the scheme which he had framed to hide it was frustrated, would calmly contrive to murder by treachery the man whom he had injured, intrust others with his purpose, execute it by their means,

* 1 Sam. xiii. 14. Acts xiii. 22. † 1 Kings xv. 5. ‡ 1 Sam. xxiv. 5.

means, and triumphantly take his wife home to himself: who could possibly have believed the prediction; or how could *David* have received the most respectful warning against such enormities, but with contempt or indignation? Yet so it was: even this good man, even when grown old in religion, was guilty of deeds, which many habitual sinners, though prompted by youthful passion, and unrestrained by the fear of God, would still have abhorred.

And if this was the case of *David*, then *let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall* *. Few, it may be doubted, have the same warmth of right resolution; but all have the same deceitful nature: and therefore we must all be continually attentive; or we know not into what abominations we may be drawn. Every man hath within him the principles of every bad action that the worst man ever did. And though in some they are languid, and seem scarce alive; yet, if fostered by indulgence, they will soon grow to incredible strength: nay, if only left to themselves, will, in seasons favourable to them, shoot up, and over-run the heart, with such surprising quickness, that all the good seed shall be choked on a sudden by tares, which we never imagined had been within us. And what increases the danger is, that each of us hath some wrong inclination or other, it is well if not several, beyond the rest natural to us, and the growth of the soil. These, therefore, we must be especially diligent to keep under, and weed out the least fibres of them that we can perceive: else we shall find them *roots of bitterness*, continually *springing up to trouble and defile us* †. Then, besides all our inward weaknesses, the world about us is thick set round with snares, differently formed: some provoking us to immoderate passion, or envious malignity; some alluring us with forbidden pleasures, or softening us into supineness and indolence, or *overcharging our hearts with the cares of this life* ‡, or bribing us with hopes of unlawful gain to do ill, or terrifying us with a prospect of sufferings for doing well. Delusive suggestions, indeed, every one of them: but of specious appearance, unless we examine them thoroughly, unless we look beyond them. And as more or fewer of these temptations are almost constantly, and often suddenly, attacking us, to which the wicked one will not fail

to

* 1 Cor. x. 12.

† Heb. xii. 15.

‡ Luke xxi. 34.

to superadd his own secret insinuations, as far as ever he is permitted; the hazard of our situation is very evident, and our watchfulness ought surely to be in proportion to it.

Not that, with all this, we have the least cause to be disheartened, but only on our guard. He that imagines himself to be safe, never is so: but they, who keep in their minds a sense of their danger, and pray for, and trust in, help from God, will always be able to avoid or go through it. Temptation hath no power, the great tempter himself hath no power, but that of using persuasion. Forced we cannot be, so long as we are true to ourselves. Our own consent must be our own giving: and without it, the rest is nothing. For then only, in effect, St. James tells us *, *is every man tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust and inticed*. That we are liable to sin, therefore, ought to be no discouragement, and can be no justification to us: for, by the assistance of heaven, though not else, we may escape it, if we will: and that assistance is expressly promised to our endeavours and our prayers. *Resist the devil, and he will flee from you: draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you* †. But to the strictest vigilance it must be a powerful incitement, to consider, how often we, how often persons much better than we, have, merely through want of vigilance, been guilty of such transgressions as could never have been suspected. But, indeed, when once we allow ourselves to go wrong, we can neither know nor guess how far we shall go.

David at first violated only the rules of decency, which he might easily have observed, and have turned away his eyes from an improper object. This, which doubtless he was willing to think a very pardonable gratification of nothing worse than curiosity, carried him on far beyond his first intention, to the heinous crime of adultery. There, undoubtedly, he designed to stop, and keep what had passed secret from all the world. But virtue hath ground to stand upon; vice hath not: and, if we give way at all, the tendency downward increases every moment. Sometimes the treacherous pleasantness of the path invites us to stray a little farther, though we are sensible it descends to the gates of hell. Sometimes the consciousness, that we are guilty already, tempts us to fancy it immaterial how

* James i. 14.

† James iv. 7, 8.

how much more we become so: without reflecting, that by every sin which we add, we diminish the hope of retreat, and augment the weight of our condemnation. Sometimes again, as in the case before us, one act of wickedness requires another, or many more, to cover it: and they, whom no fear of God, or shame of doing evil, could awe sufficiently, have yet such a preposterous fear of men, and shame of being found out, that, to avoid a discovery, they will commit still worse evil, and then be discovered at last. Thus did *David*. After he had tried in vain to conceal his adultery from *Uriah* by an artifice, which the gallant soldier, without knowing it, disappointed from a principle of honour; he was driven to the most horrible of all wickedness, murder; and a murder too, accompanied with the heaviest aggravations: deliberately planned, brought about by treachery, in which also he involved the general at least, if not many others of the army, as his instruments: and made the poor man himself, as if he had not been injured and deceived enough before, the bearer of those letters, which doomed him to die, innocent of all misbehaviour, of all imputation of misbehaviour, and valiantly fighting for his sovereign, by whom he was betrayed and assassinated.

In this dreadful manner was one, who had been till then of an excellent character, hurried on, from a single, and seemingly slight, indulgence, into the depth of the grossest and most shocking villanies. And in the like manner may any one, if he is not upon his guard against *the deceitfulness of sin**, be hurried unawares to his final destruction. That sin, indeed, with which *David* began, is peculiarly ensnaring and pernicious. The lower degrees of immodesty lead on imperceptibly to the most unlawful familiarities. These entangle persons in a variety of difficulties, that reduce them to do the basest and cruelest things that can be. And particularly as unchastity induced *David* to treachery and murder, so there hath been in all times more treachery, and more murder, of rivals, of poor innocent children, of one another, of themselves, occasioned by it, than perhaps by any other transgression whatever.

But all others have, in their several proportions, the tendency of sinking us into deeper guilt. Lesser instances of dishonesty lead, often by slow, but usually sure, steps, to the more enormous

* Heb. iii. 13.



enormous and capital crimes of that sort. Lesser instances of undue parsimony grow insensibly into the meanest and most sordid avarice : lesser instances of greediness of gain, into the most hard-hearted rapaciousness. And on the other hand, little negligences in their affairs, little affectations of living above their ability, little pieces of expensive vanity and extravagance, are the direct road to those confirmed habits of carelessness and prodigality, by which people foolishly and wickedly ruin themselves and their families, and too commonly others besides their own. After the same manner, slight expressions, in words or behaviour, of contempt or ill-humour, easily swell into the fiercest contention, the bitterest resentment, the most rancorous hatred. And, to specify no more particulars, mere indolent omissions of religious duties, public or private, leave our sentiments of piety to languish and decay, till we become utterly unmindful of our eternal interest : and, it may be, at last, profane scoffers and blasphemers against God. Always, therefore, beware of small sins. Great ones carry something in them, that startles and alarms : but these, insinuating themselves more gently, gain admittance more readily ; and so, as the son of *Sirach* wisely observes, *He that contemneth little things, shall fall by little and little* *.

II. The next point to be observed from this part of scripture-history is, that men are very apt to overlook their own misdemeanors, and yet to be extremely quick-sighted and severe in relation to those of others.

The facts which *David* had committed were the plainest, the most palpable, the most crying sins, that could be : Nothing, one should think, to excuse them ; nothing to disguise them ; no name but their own to call them by : adultery, falsehood, murder. From the first to the last there must have intervened some considerable space of time, with a great deal of thought upon the subject : yet no reflection that deterred him from prosecuting his wicked schemes. Even after the murder, many months appear to have passed before *Nathan* was sent to him : still *David* had not recollected himself, but seemed to go on in perfect tranquillity. Nay, which is more astonishing than the rest, when the prophet had contrived a story on purpose to

* *Eccles. xix. 1.*

convict him of his guilt, representing the first part of it so exactly, that nothing, which was not the same under different names, could be liker, it never once brought it, so far as appears, to his memory. Yet all this while he had not, in the least degree, lost the sense of what was right and wrong in general. So far from it, that he was moved with the most vehement abhorrence of the rich man's barbarous injustice and oppression, in taking away his poor neighbour's lamb from him, when he had plenty of his own. *And David's anger was greatly kindled against the man: and he said to Nathan, As the Lord liveth, the man, that hath done this thing, shall surely die: and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity. And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man.*

How surprising a blow must this be! In the midst of his wrath, when, forgetful of his own iniquity, he had not only adjudged a person, much less culpable, to pay the legal penalty of a quadruple restitution, but, from excessive detestation of his crime, indeed a hateful one, had even, contrary to law, pronounced sentence of death upon him; then to be told, *Thou art the man!* Let us often think of this case: and as often remember, that, with equal truth, though God forbid it should be in an equal measure, the same thing holds concerning every one of us. We all know our duty, or easily may: we are all abundantly ready at seeing and censuring what others do amiss: and yet we all continue, more or less, to do amiss ourselves, without regarding it. The main precepts of life, such as we are most apt to fail in, are partly obvious to reason, partly taught with sufficient clearness by revelation. And though, for want of cultivating their own understandings, or hearkening to God's word, some wicked actions, plausibly disguised, may be esteemed, by too many, allowable, or even laudable; yet the mask is not hard to pull off; and the more heinous sort, indeed the higher degrees of all, have a deformity almost incapable of being hidden. Let all the sophistry in the world recommend, let all the powers upon earth enjoin, irreligion, cruelty, fraud, promiscuous lewdness: it will, notwithstanding, be altogether impossible, either to make the practice of them tolerable to society, or to change in all the inward abhorrence of them, which mankind in general are led by nature

to entertain. It is true, where iniquity of any kind is once publicly practised and allowed, human minds are apt to be strangely blinded in relation to it, especially if they have no revelation from above to direct them. And even though the bulk of a nation be more enlightened and more virtuous; yet, in some persons, on some occasions, natural sentiments may be weakened or depraved, by early wrong notions and immoral habits; as in others common understanding is impaired, or lost, by bodily disorders. It may also in cases of intricacy be doubted, whether such an action deserves such a name; while yet, if it doth, it is allowed to be bad. But still the majority even of Heathens, and surely then of Christians, do or may, for the most part, as clearly discern what is blameable and commendable, as what is crooked and streight. Let this be tried in a transaction of any distant age or country, or in a feigned piece of history, such as the prophet invented for *David*; and, unless they suspect it to be designed as a parallel for themselves, they will very seldom fail, if they consider at all, of passing a righteous sentence. Let it be tried in the conduct of an acquaintance or contemporary; the principal danger will be, of a sentence too rigorous. For if the sin, brought in question before us, be one to which we have no inclination, we shall be sure to censure it without the least mercy. And though it be one of which we have been guilty, provided our guilt be unknown or forgotten, we can usually declare against it as harshly as the most innocent person alive. Or how moderate soever the consciousness of our own past behaviour might otherwise dispose us to be: yet if once we come to be sufferers ourselves by the same kind of sins, which we have formerly indulged, and perhaps often made others suffer by them, then we can be immoderately loud in our complaints of what formerly we fancied, or pretended, had little or no hurt in it. Nay, without any such provocation, few things are commoner, than to hear people condemn their own faults in those around them: and, sometimes possibly to blind the world, but very frequently because they are blind to themselves, vehemently exclaiming against vices, to which, if all that know them are not strangely mistaken, they are most notoriously addicted. Not uncommonly, indeed, this is the true reason of such invectives. One man's pride or selfishness stands in the way of another, just as

proud, or as selfish : and he hath no patience to see any one else do what he wants to do without controll.

Now these instances prove we are convinced, that all sorts of sins are wrong : only we err in the application of our conviction. No one's failings escape us, but our own : and of them the most glaring escape us. Self-love persuades us to think favourably of our conduct in general : a secret suspicion, which we labour to stifle, restrains us from examining much into particulars : what we are strongly disposed to do, we think we must, for the sake of inward peace, endeavour to believe harmless or excusable : this puts us on seeking out for real or imaginary differences of circumstances, which, we flatter ourselves, make that either innocent, or nearly so, in us, which in others ought not to be borne. Then, in some things, the bounds between lawful and unlawful are hard to be exactly determined. Now unfair minds lay hold on these difficulties with inexpressible eagerness : and chusing, not, as they should, the safer side, but that to which the bias within attracts them, proceed, under the cover of such doubts, to the most undoubted wickedness : as if, because it is not easy to say precisely, at what moment of the evening light ends and darkness begins, therefore midnight could not be distinguished from noon-day. Thus, because it cannot be ascertained, just how much every one ought to give in charity, too many will give nothing, or next to nothing. Because the price of labour, and of the commodities produced by it, have no absolute standard ; they will to the utmost oppress the poor in their wages, or the valuation of what they bring to sell ; and nevertheless make the most unconscionable demands on those who come to buy of them. Because no one can settle to a nicety, what sobriety and temperance permit, and no more : therefore men will *feed themselves without fear* *, and *tarry long at the wine* †, make *their belly their God, and glory in their shame* ‡. Because it cannot be exactly decided, how much time is the most that we may allowably spend in recreation and amusement : therefore multitudes will consume almost the whole of their days in trifling and levity and folly, instead of applying to the proper business

* Jude 12.

† Prov. xxiii. 30.

‡ Phil. iii. 19.

of life, in order to give their account with joy to him, who shall judge the quick and the dead *.

These and the like things they will, some of them, defend and palliate with wonderful acuteness; designed partly to excuse them to others, but chiefly to deceive and pacify themselves. Not that they ever attain either of these ends. For their neighbours, after all, just as plainly perceive their faults, as they perceive those of their neighbours. And it is but a half deceit that they put upon their own souls. Every now and then they see through it, whether they will or will not; see a very threatening prospect before them: and, though they do shut their eyes, and slumber again, and tell themselves all is peace; yet this dream of security is but a very disturbed one: Nothing like the clear and joyful perception, that he hath, whose conscience is thoroughly awake, and assures him of his own innocence, or true repentance, and interest in the pardon which his Redeemer hath purchased. But in however strong delusion † God may permit them to remain at present: how can they be sure, but ere long remorse may seize them, an adversary expose them, a friend rebuke him: one way or other, the case of *David*, who doubtless thought he was exceedingly safe, become theirs; and some voice proclaim aloud to them, what they are afraid of whispering to themselves, *Thou art the man!* Though indeed, could we effectually impose on all the world, and our own minds too; could this imposition last to our life's end, and not vanish at the approach of death, which commonly represents to the guilty their past conduct in a very new and tremendous light; what could we get by it, but more certain and exquisite misery?

Therefore one of the happiest things imaginable is, being made sensible of our sins in time: and the first step to that is, reflecting how liable we are, both to commit them and to overlook them. If such a one as *David* could fall into such transgressions as he did, and continue in them so long, and forget them so intirely: into how many gross ones, into how many more speciously coloured over, may we have fallen in the course of our lives, negligent as we are? And how possible is it, unless we have faithfully searched our hearts, that we may
be

* Heb. xiii. 17. 1 Pet. iv. 5.

† 2 Theff. ii. 11.

be thoughtlessly going on to a future state, and some of us near it, under heavy loads of complicated guilt? Surely self-inspection then is absolutely necessary: and if we set about the work honestly, it is by no means difficult. What passes within our breasts is not far from us: what hath passed there formerly may, in general, be recollected: and what we are usually forced to take much pains to hide from ourselves, we may, if we will, soon lay open. Let us each, therefore, consider seriously, as persons whose interest lies in discovering, not concealing: Is there no *way of wickedness in me* *, no blot upon my conduct and character? No failing that I should reproach my neighbour for; none that my enemy or ill-wisher, at least if he knew all, as I do, and God doth, could reproach me for? Are there not, indeed, several things of this kind, and how many, and what are they? For it is my concern to know them all; and to think what the end of all will be. Such an inquiry as this would call off our attention from the too pleasing employment of judging those around us, to a more important trial within. We should see, that if they have faults, so have we likewise great ones, though it may be of different kinds: and which are worse upon the whole, is for God alone to determine. Our common guilt acquits neither before him, excuses neither for the mutual injuries they do, authorizes neither to disregard the censure of the world: but this effect the sense, how blameworthy we all are, should certainly have: it should restrain even the best of us from reproving with haughtiness, and punishing with severity: it should incline the more obnoxious to be singularly gentle and mild in relation to offenders: and it should instruct us every one to think and act with great charity towards others, and employ our zeal chiefly, where there will seldom be danger of excess, in correcting and reforming ourselves. But this would bring me to the third head: to which I must not proceed at present: and shall therefore conclude with begging you to observe, concerning what you have heard already, that you will never become either duly sensible of your sinful dispositions and actual transgressions, or able to amend what you do find of them, unless you are first excited, and then assisted, by the grace of our blessed

* Psal. cxxxix. 24.

bleſſed Saviour, *without whom we can do nothing* *. There-
fore, whenever duties of any kind are preſſed upon you, al-
ways remember, whether you are told it or not, that you muſt
pray as well as endeavour: pray in his name, and *through*
faith in his blood †, *who of God is made unto us wiſdom,*
and righteousneſs, and ſanctification, and redemption ‡: fully
aſſured, that, weak as we are in ourſelves, *we can do all*
things through Chriſt, which ſtrengtheneth us §: to whom
therefore, &c.

* John xv. 5.

† Rom. iii. 25.

‡ 1 Cor. i. 30.

§ Phil. iv. 13.

S E R M O N X X X V I .

ON THE DECEITFULNESS OF SIN.

2 SAM. xii. 13.

*And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord.
And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away
thy sin : thou shalt not die.*

FROM that portion of scripture, in which these words are contained, I lately recommended to your serious notice the following points of doctrine.

I. That, without continual care, the best of men may be led into the worst of crimes.

II. That we are all very apt to overlook our own faults, and yet to be extremely quicksighted and severe in relation to those of others.

III. That as soon as ever we are, by any means, made sensible of our offences, we should acknowledge them with due penitence.

IV. That, on doing this, the greatest sins will be forgiven us. Yet,

V. That sins, even after they are forgiven, produce frequently such lamentable consequences, that on this account, amongst others, innocence is greatly preferable to the truest repentance.

On the two first of these I have already discoursed : and proceed now to the

III. That as soon as we are, by any means, made sensible of our offences, we ought to acknowledge them with due penitence.

David,

David, it seems, till the prophet came to put him on considering his ways, had not done it to any good purpose, ever since the adultery and murder which he had committed: tho' a very little thought had been sufficient, and it is amazing, that he could avoid thinking enough, to shew him his guilt. Had he continued insensible of it, not all his past piety could have preserved him from future damnation. For the threatening which God commanded the prophet *Ezekiel* to pronounce, ever hath been, and will be, without exception, the rule of his proceeding. *Son of man, say unto the children of thy people, When I say to the righteous, that he shall surely live: if he trust to his own righteousness, and commit iniquity, all his righteousness shall not be remembered*. In his trespasss that he hath trespassed, and in his sin that he hath sinned, in them shall he die†.* But, though it was not consistent with infinite justice, holiness and wisdom, to accept *David*, whilst in this condition: yet it was perfectly suitable to infinite goodness to awaken him out of it. Accordingly, *Nathan* was sent to him with a divine commission for that purpose: who having first endeavoured, without success, to execute it in a gentler and more respectful way, that of insinuating admonition, applied his parable at last in the plainest words; nor was content with telling him directly, *Thou art the man*, but, undoubtedly finding it requisite, followed even this home-charge yet farther, by laying the particulars of his guilt, with its heavy aggravations, before his eyes.

And here *David's* example begins to be as useful for our imitation, as it had been before for our warning. Struck to the very heart with the sense of so many and heinous iniquities, crowding in at once upon his mind; and abhorring himself for being able, first to commit, and then to overlook them; he cries out, *I have sinned against the Lord*. Few words, indeed, but greatly expressive; and the more for being few. Astonishment, confusion, terror, might well stop the utterance of more for the present, and for no small time. Afterwards his sorrow obtained the relief of free vent: and his penitent Psalms, especially the fifty-first, composed, as the title informs us, on this very occasion, express, most pathetically, the depth of his humiliation, and the earnestness of his intreaties for pardon,

* Ezek. xxxiii. 12, 13.

† Ezek. xviii. 24.

even after he had been assured of it: for still the consciousness, that he was unworthy to receive it, would prompt him to beg it continually. *Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving-kindness: according to the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity: and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight* *. As if he had said, great as my crime is against my fellow-creatures, it is nothing, compared with that against my Creator. However secure I may be against their resentment, it yields me no comfort, while I continue an object of his wrath. You may read over the rest in private: the same spirit breathes from the beginning to the end. Now, the king might easily have given the prophet a very different reception: have denied the fact, driven him from his presence, confined him as a madman, punished him as a false accuser: or might have broke off the discourse as soon as it grew painful, pleaded urgent affairs, and told him, as *Felix* did *Paul*, even when he trembled under his preaching, *Go thy way for this time: when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee* †: a season which he determined should never come. Nay, truly, according to modern modes of thinking, he might have frankly owned the whole: treated the adultery as a trifle, especially in a person of any rank; and perhaps the murder too, as an undesirable consequence indeed, but an unavoidable one, of *Uriah's* absurd behaviour. For sinners have numberless arts to fence against the reproaches of others, and to pacify themselves. But *David* had now too affecting a conviction of the horrors of the state in which he had lived so long, once to think of adding to it fresh offences: and therefore, without the least anger at the prophet, without the least excuse for his own conduct, without the least delay, he humbly confesses, *I have sinned against the Lord*.

Let all of thus then, who like *David* have sinned, in whatever instance it be, greater or less, repent like *David* too: and, instead of perversely defending ourselves by the bad part of his example, resolve immediately to reform ourselves according to the good. Better were it also, that our amendment should be accomplished by our own private reflections on what we have done

* Psal. li. 1, 2, 3, 4.

† Acts xxiv. 25.

done amiss: for this would manifest a greater sensibility of heart, and strength of good purpose, than if foreign aid appear to be wanting. But the case before us plainly shews, that we have sometimes absolute need of other monitors besides that within. For if a man, of so much piety and discernment as *David* had, was so long without thinking, and perhaps, left to himself, would never have thought effectually, of such flagrant crimes as his were: how highly necessary is some remembrance to the generality of persons, who are so desirous to impose upon themselves, and in the many points of conduct, where that worse kind of delusion is so easily practised? As therefore God appointed his prophets formerly by occasional and extraordinary commissions, he hath now given the ministers of his word a standing and constant one, to *show his people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins* *. We have not, as they had often, the cases of single persons revealed to us, and given us in charge: nor need we now, when the returns of public instruction and exhortation, comprehending all cases, are so frequent. We are not sent to this or that sinner by name: and it is but seldom that we dare trust ourselves to undertake voluntarily a matter of such delicacy, as separate reproof or examination; where false reports and opinions, prejudices and passions, may so probably occasion us to mistake, or be mistaken; and circumstances without number may produce harm from our attempt, instead of good. From this place, therefore, we direct our warnings to you all in general: and deceive not yourselves, and injure not us, by suspecting us at any time of such wickedness and folly, as to think of pointing from hence at any one in particular. We leave it intirely to your own consciences to tell each of you in your turn, when your own guilt is touched, *Thou art the man*. We hope they tell you so faithfully, when we little imagine there is need of it: and the intent of the ministry committed to us is that they should. *For the word of God, intrusted with us, unworthy as we are, is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart* †. It is to him you lie open, and not to us, when you hear your bosom sins described. It is from

3 F 2

knowing,

* Isa. lviii. 1.

† Heb. iv. 12.

knowing, chiefly by the study of the holy scriptures, what mankind are, that we speak, not from information what such or such a man is, when you fancy we hint at the failings of your neighbours. Use not therefore the preaching of the gospel, either for a matter of reproach to them, or of accusation against us: but solely in subservience to its important design, the reformation of yourselves. Whenever the picture of deformity, which we draw, is not your own, thank God for it, and forbear to consider whom it may resemble. Whenever it is your own, in whole or in part, which the witnesses within your breasts will, if permitted, and perhaps though forbidden, plainly signify to you; embrace the conviction meekly and sincerely: stand not against it, fly not from it; but search the wound to the bottom, and let repentance *have its perfect work**.

Indeed, let the person, that makes you known to yourselves, be ever so little authorized to do it, still you are indispensably concerned to take notice of it. If he profess himself a friend, he hath given you the truest and boldest proof of his friendship that can be. If he be a mere acquaintance or a stranger, but appear to admonish you with good intention, you ought to esteem him for it as long as you live. And were you to believe him ever so much your enemy, never let that provoke you to become your own: think only, if he speaks truth, and submit to it; amend, and disappoint him. Strive not to make yourselves easy in what you feel is wrong, but quit it. Strive not to colour over and palliate matters: for this is deceiving no one but your own souls. If you are hitherto undiscovered by the world, leaving off is by far the likeliest way to be secure: if others know your faults, all you have remaining is to let them know your penitence too. On this, whoever hath any sense, either of religion or humanity, will treat you tenderly. But whatever shame may attend acknowledging errors and changing wrong courses, it is only part of what they have deserved; and we had much better be ashamed in this life than the next. Sooner or later, every sinner must repent: and the single question is, whether it shall be hereafter, when grief will serve only for an ingredient in our misery; or now, while it may intirely prevent the danger, and be followed immediately by comfort and joy. Surely this case is much too clear
to

* James i. 4.

to admit of doubt. And therefore let us all zealously pursue the advice given to *Job*: *If iniquity be in thine hand, put it far away, and let not wickedness dwell in thy tabernacle. For then shalt thou lift up thy face without spot: yea, thou shalt be stedfast, and shalt not fear**. No sooner had *David* said, with due contrition of heart, *I have sinned against the Lord*, but *Nathan* revived him with that assurance, *The Lord also hath put away thy sin, thou shalt not die*: which is the ground-work of the observation to be made from the text.

IV. That if we repent as we ought, the greatest sins will be forgiven us.

This indeed our own reason cannot promise with any certainty at all. God we know is good. Man is frail. And hence we have cause to hope, that his goodness will extend to the pardon of our frailties. But then, in proportion as we go beyond frailties, to gross, deliberate, wilful, habitual transgressions, this hope diminishes continually: till at length it becomes exceedingly doubtful; and especially to those, whose inward peace depends the most upon not doubting, whether the holiness of God's nature, and the honour of his universal government, will suffer him to pardon some offenders at all, however penitent; whether any, without previous correction; (who knows what, or how long?) and whether he will bestow future happiness, for a greater time or a less, even where he may inflict no future punishment. Still, in the midst of these perplexities, be they ever so inextricable, repentance, including the amendment for which men have strength, is not only their duty, but their wisdom too: because insensibility of old sins, and addition of new ones, will make their condition, bad as it may be, daily worse: and so far as any thing of their own doing can better it, reformation must. But knowledge of thus much only, though it affords very proper direction, suggests little comfort at the same time, or spirit to follow direction. And therefore every manifestation of his pleasure, which God hath made to man from the beginning, hath always carried in it some encouragement to trust in his mercy, beyond the motives which our unassisted faculties were able to furnish. Yet the pardon of such sins, attended with such aggravations, as *David's* were, had not, even in his days, by any means been expressly

* *Job* xi. 14, 15.

exprefsly promifed. And therefore this declaration of the prophet muft not only relieve him, in the agony of his guilt, from the dreadfulft apprehenfions that can be conceived; on which account, we may prefume, it was made to him fo inftantly: but muft alfo diffufe confolation among multitudes, through that and the following ages, which could not fail to be acquainted with fo extraordinary a cafe; and muft incline all true penitents to believe, that theirs alfo, whatever it was, would, on like terms, obtain favour. But ftill it is eafy to miftake in arguing from one cafe to another, efpecially our own: befides that particular inftances do not amount to general affurances. And though fuch affurances were given in the latter part of the *Jewifh* revelation, chiefly by the prophet *Ezekiel* *: yet it might not be clear to every one, whether they related to another life, or only to the prefent: nor was this revelation received, or known almoft, in any nation, excepting that one. The unlimited gospel-promifes therefore of forgiveness and grace, proclaimed to all the world, have made a change, unfpeakably happy, in the condition of mankind.

And now, as we are ftangely apt to apply every thing wrong, too many, inftead of the extreme of defpondency, run into that of profane boldnefs: and are very near looking upon fin, as nothing to be dreaded; and remiffion of fin, as nothing to be thankful for. At leaft the certainty of it they conceive, they could eafily have difcovered of themfelves: and therefore have little obligation to *Chrift*, the publifher of a truth fo obvious. Nor is it a wonder, if they, who think lightly of transgreffion, think lightly of pardon alfo: taking one to be a trifle, they muft take the other to be a matter of courfe. But whoever confiders in earneft, what it is to have difobeyed the commands, and contradicted the wife and good purpofes of the Almighty; to have injured his creatures, our own brethren; to have perverted the nature he hath given us; to have difqualified ourfelves from doing and being what he made us for; and to have been guilty of all this, in fpite of the expoftulations of our confciences and our friends, and of his exprefs threatenings of hell-fire: far from entertaining prefumptuous imaginations of fafety, from any thing he can know by his own wifdom, or perform by his own ftrength, will earneftly

* *Ezek.* xviii. 21, 22, 23. xxxiii. 14, 15, 16.

neftly long for instruction and help from above; and feel the moft affectionate gratitude to him, who hath not only revealed, but procured peace for us, at the price of his blood: offering up his life on the crofs, Son of God as he was: fo great was the difficulty, to make it confiftent with juftice and holinefs to exercife mercy!

Indeed, after all that hath been done to affure us it fhall be exercifed, there are fome, of minds more tenderly fenfible than ordinary, who, after committing great offences, or perhaps, only fuch as to them appear very great, experience the utmoft reluctance, either to be reconciled to themfelves, or perfuaded that God will be reconciled to them. And hence not a few of them plunge desperately into whatever folly or fin will drive away their uneafinefs for the prefent; while others go on in the moft punctual practice of piety, but enjoy fcarce any fatisfaction from it, overwhelming themfelves on every occafion and none, with groundlefs terrors. The pernicious impatience of the former proceeds, in great meafure, from a very abfurd and criminal pride, which ought to be humbled by the prudent feverity of juft reproof. But the meek dejection of the latter calls for the tendereft compaffion and the kindeft encouragement; yet, perhaps, intermixed, now and then, with fome degree of gentle chiding. To fuch therefore it muft be faid; your grief and fear prove, that your heart is not hardened, but fincerely defirous to ferve and pleafe God: the good works, which he enables you to perform fo regularly, prove your faith and repentance: the imperfections, which you bewail, all his children have, not you alone. *Why then are you caft down, and your foul difquieted within you* *? How ill foever you may think of yourfelves; though God requires you not in the leaft to think worfe than the truth, and would have you judge calmly of your fpiritual ftate, not under the difability of a fright: but whatever opinion you may form of your own defects, forbear to entertain an injurious one of him. When he hath fent his bleffed Son to make atonement for you, when he hath told you in his holy word, when he tells you by his minifters every day, that this atonement reaches to the very worft of cafes, do not except your own in contradiction to him:

do

do not indulge doubts and scruples about what he hath plainly promised, in order to be miserable against his will: but, together with the sorrow of having offended, allow yourselves to feel the joy of being restored to favour. A wise and good parent would wish to have his child affected only in a moderate manner with a sense of his past faults, when once he is returned to his duty: and though still he hath the weaknesses incident to his tender age, doth not reject him for them, or desire he should sink under them; but strive against them with a cheering belief, that he shall out-grow them, as he approaches to maturity. Why will you not reflect then, that, *like as a father pitieth his own children, even so is the Lord merciful to them that fear him? For he knoweth whereof we are made; he remembereth that we are but dust* *.

It is extremely unhappy, that when persons attend public discourses on religion, in which different instructions, designed for as different sorts of auditors, must however be spoken to all sorts promiscuously, each, for the most part, applies to himself just what doth not belong to him, notwithstanding the best care to prevent it. The bold sinner confides most securely in what he hears of God's-mercy: while the low-spirited penitent almost dies away at the mention of his justice. The first hath no dread of the most wilful sins, because the nature of man is frail; the last hath no peace about the most excusable deficiencies, because the precepts of the gospel are strict. We can only caution them, not to mistake thus: and beg they would have a more serious regard, on the one side, to their future happiness; on the other, to their present comfort. It grieves us to think of the terrors, that we may sometimes occasion those to suffer, who have no need to suffer any at all. But we must of necessity give out the strongest warnings against the greatest danger: and run the risque, if we cannot avoid it, of making a few good persons uneasy without cause, rather than leave many bad ones asleep in fatal self-flattery. For indeed the doctrine of forgiveness, though in itself the most ingenuous motive to thankful piety and obedience, is too often most disingenuously perverted to encourage transgression. Repentance, men argue, is sure to obtain pardon: and pardon restores us
to

* Psalm ciii. 13, 14.

to the state we were in before we did amiss. What need have we then to scruple going a little wrong, when the method of setting all right again immediately is so plain before us? But in reality, true repentance, a thorough change of temper and purpose, manifested by a course of suitable conduct, will be found, neither a short nor an easy work; but one exceeding the power of man, without the help of God. And not to say, how uncertain it is, whether God will give these artful contrivers time to repent effectually, what prospect is there in the least, that they will have a heart to do it? When once they have been so deliberately base and wicked as to rebel against him for that very reason, which ought, of all others, to have made them dutiful to him; where is the likelihood, that they will ever become so honest and good, as to return and serve him faithfully? No alteration requires a larger share of his grace to affect it: and no sinners have less ground to expect any share of it, than these. But were it ever so probable, that even such offenders might come to amend their doings, yet there is an awful observation, arising from the history before us, which remains to be insisted on,

V. That wickedness, even after it is forsaken, and after it is forgiven, produces nevertheless very often consequences so lamentable, that for this cause, amongst others, innocence is greatly preferable to the sincerest and completest repentance, that ever was.

In the very same breath, that *Nathan* tells *David* the Lord had put away his sin, he tells him also of a trying affliction, and a very trying one it proved, that he should immediately undergo on account of that sin. *Howbeit because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child that is born unto thee, shall surely die* *. Nor could the most fervent intercessions of the royal penitent reverse the decree. Nay, the threatening prediction, which the prophet made to him before his repentance, that because he had killed *Uriah* with the sword, the sword should not depart from his house; and as he had polluted his wife, his own should be polluted in the sight of the sun †, was permitted to befall him, notwithstanding his repentance, with great exactness.

VOL. I.

3 G

Nor

* 2 Sam. xii. 14.

† 2 Sam. xii. 9,—12.

Nor doth there need much reflection upon what passes in the world to see, that Providence, to this day, frequently suffers events of a like nature to happen: partly to complete the humiliation of the sinner, partly that others may *bear and fear* *.

Sometimes no immediate connexion between the transgression and the suffering is visible, that it may seem to be the hand of God, rather than a natural effect; though indeed, would men consider, every effect proceeds from his hand: but commonly they are closely linked, to deter men from committing iniquity, by shewing them before-hand, what fruits they must expect it to produce. Indeed, were only the pain inseparable from repentance, the feeling of having done ill and deserved ill, to distinguish the condition of him who returns to his duty, from his who has always adhered to it; the distinction would be very interesting and important. For how wide is the difference between hating and approving ourselves: between thinking of God with dread and shame, and rejoicing in him as *our trust from our youth* †, and *our portion for ever* ‡! But long after peace is restored within, which yet will never be so restored to great offenders, as not to leave matter of melancholy reflection; long after penitents are at ease with respect to their future state; afflicting consequences with respect to the present, will flow from what they have done amiss. Often they have hurt themselves, alienated their friends, lost their time and opportunities of doing well in the world, injured their characters, their fortunes, their healths: often they have hurt others, set mischievous examples; inticed, betrayed, oppressed, provoked, those around them; and destroyed, perhaps, by short folies, what the endeavours of the rest of their days will never be able to repair. These, indeed, are considerations, under which they should not despond: but surely others ought to take warning from them, and learn of how unspeakable value it is, to *keep innocency, and take heed to the thing that is right* §, from the very first. Life was not intended to be led inconsistently; one part in doing wrong, the other in being sorry for it. Uniform obedience is our Maker's demand: and
 whoever

* Deut. xiii. 11.

† Psalm lxi. 5.

‡ Psalm lxxiii. 26.

§ Psalm xxxvii. 38.

whoever departs from it wilfully, though he may return, will assuredly be made to *know and see*, one way or other, that it is *a thing evil and bitter, that he hath forsaken the Lord his God* *. Let those then, who experience this in themselves, submit to it with patience, and revere his justice: let those, who see it in others, thankfully make use of the instruction it was graciously designed to give them: and let us all preserve a lively sense upon our souls, that *evil pursueth sinners, but to the righteous good shall be repaid* †.

* Jer. ii. 19.

† Prov. xiii. 21.

S E R M O N X X X V I I .

ON CHRISTIAN PERFECTION.

PHIL. iv. 8.

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

AS the excellent characters of the first believers and teachers of Christianity are in general a strong recommendation of it to mankind: so that of St. *Paul* in particular shines with distinguished lustre through his whole history; but especially his epistles, the faithful pictures of his soul. Even in this short one to the *Philippians*, it is surprising to observe, how great a variety of most exalted and engaging virtues he shews. The authority of the apostle is so perfectly tempered with the condescension of the fellow-Christian: the expressions of his tenderness for those to whom he writes are so endearing and instructive at the same time: his acknowledgments of their kindnesses to him, so equally full of dignity, humility, and disinterestedness: his mention of his past persecutions is so mild; and of his present danger, (for he wrote from a prison) so cheerful: his attention to the supporting of their courage is so affecting; and his confidence, that both he and they should persevere and conquer, is so noble, and yet so modest: his deliberation, whether life or death be eligible, is so calm; and his preference to live, even in misery, for their sakes and that of the gospel, is so genuinely heroic, yet fully equalled by the composed

composed and triumphant mention, which he elsewhere makes, of his approaching martyrdom : his zeal for propagating religion is so ardent ; yet attended with so deep a concern, that it be indeed true religion : he is so earnest to guard them, both against a superstitious reliance on outward observances, and a licentious abuse of the doctrines of faith and grace ; so solicitous to improve them in rational piety, and meek beneficent virtue ; so intent to fix their minds on every thing worthy and amiable, and raise them above every thing gloomy or anxious ; his warmth in this glorious cause, is so far from being affected or forced ; and every expression so evidently flows from a heart, which cannot help overflowing ; that, whoever shall read but this one epistle with attention and fairness, under all the disadvantages of a translation made word for word, and broken into short verses, will feel a strong impression on his mind, that the writer of it must have been an uncommonly great and good man ; every way deserving of the high rank, which he claims, of a commissioned servant of God, and incapable of claiming it falsely.

But, besides being thus moved with the admirable spirit expressed, and the sublime precepts diffused, throughout the whole ; it will be still a new subject of esteem and wonder, to see the force and substance of them all collected at last into one brief exhortation ; comprehending, in so narrow a space, the intire compass of virtuous dispositions, and right behaviour, as is done in the text : to which he subjoins with conscious boldness, appealing to all which *they had learned and received, and heard and seen of him* *, that this had been his own disposition and behaviour : yet humbly considers himself as *not having already attained or being already perfect*, but merely as *pressing towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God* † ; and not only uses his own *prayers*, but begs *theirs* also, that, *through the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ*, all things may *turn to his salvation* ‡. We cannot help honouring such a character : but, if we hope to be the better for it, we must also imitate it. And therefore let us examine with this view, that description of it which I have read to you. Had the several phrases, used in it, been as nearly as possible equivalent, and accumulated only to convey the intended meaning more fully

* Phil. iv. 9.

† Phil. iii. 13, 14.

‡ Phil. i. 19, 20.

fully and strongly, this would have been warranted by the example of the great *Roman* orator, who professes to have done the same thing on a like occasion *. But there is a superior accuracy and beauty in the words of the apostle. Each of them singly hath a distinct sense : and joined together they form a connected and complete body of duty, as will appear by examining them separately : which I shall therefore do in the first place ; and then, secondly, make a general observation upon the whole.

Truth, always present to the mind of God, is the ground of his commands ; and, so far as discerned by us, is the ground of our obedience. On this accordingly the apostle here builds, and lays for the foundation of his whole superstructure, *Whatever things are true* : that is, conformable to the clear perceptions of our understandings, the inward feelings of our hearts, the known circumstances of our situation. Setting out thus, he excludes, in the first word, from being any part of Christian duty, every thing romantic and visionary, all refinements of false honour, all enthusiasm of a heated fancy. But he enjoins at the same time, whatever is reasonable and right ; be the practice or notions of the world as contrary to it as they will : whatever the sovereign principle of conscience dictates, though passions and appetites may draw powerfully another way ; whatever the impartial state of any case requires, let vanity or interest make ever so much against it : what we owe to our Maker, no less than what is due to our fellow-creatures : what divine revelation teaches, no less than what human faculties discover : what the future, as well as the present condition of our being demands. For our relations to God are as real, and infinitely more important, than to man ; those parts of his will which only scripture makes known, the authority of scripture being proved, are intitled to equal attention with those which reason dictates of itself : and such consequences of our actions, as will follow beyond the grave, are but a single

* Nihil enim habet præstantius [natura], nihil quod magis expetat, quam honestatem, quam laudem, quam dignitatem, quam decus. Hisce ego pluribus nominibus unam rem declarari volo : sed utor, ut quam maxime significem, pluribus. Cic. Tusc. Disp. l. ii. c. 20.

See also A. Gell. l. xiii. c. 24. where several instances of this manner of speaking are given, and reasons for it alledged : and Cic. De N. D. l. ii. § 7. and De Fin. l. iii. c. 4.

gle and a short step more distant, than the visible and daily ones that follow them here. These maxims are the solid basis of proper conduct: the whole creation cannot shake them; and every other scheme of life is built upon the sand, and will crush us under its ruins. God himself proceeds invariably according to the reason of things; he must therefore expect man to hold it sacred; and both the honour of his government and the holiness of his nature stand engaged, that, sooner or later, every one shall find his account in observing this rule, but none in transgressing it. For *his righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and his law is the truth* *.

The second head of the apostle's injunction is, *Whatsoever things are honest*: or rather, as the marginal translation hath it, *venerable*, intitled to respect: for so the original word in the Greek confessedly signifies, as indeed the word *honest* itself doth in the Latin tongue, from whence it is derived into ours.

If, pursuant to the former direction, we consider, according to truth, the inward frame of our hearts and minds, we shall perceive, that, as man was created at first in the image of God, so there still remains in our nature, however defaced by the fall, a sense of dignity and worth, which we ought to reverence in ourselves and others. The lowest of men, with reason, think falsehood and dishonesty beneath them; and the highest, if they condescend to use them, lose, by so doing, a much truer greatness than they retain. Worldly advantages leave the possessors of them but just the same men, which they would have been without them. Personal accomplishments as often produce wrong conduct, hatred, contempt and misery, as they do the contrary. At best, neither the one nor the other can give more than a short-lived and precarious distinction. But scorn of wickedness, and esteem of our duty, shewn in practice, this is the valuable pre-eminence, which will continue an ornament to us through every condition of life, through every period of our existence; will entitle us to inward veneration, as well as outward regard, and recommend us, not only to fallible beings, but to the unerring searcher of our hearts, and final rewarder of our deeds. Whoever therefore would obtain a truly honourable character, must preserve himself above dishonourable actions: and never permit either profit, or pleasure,

* Psalm cxix. 142.

pleasure, or favour, or power, titular pre-eminences, or popular opinion, to debase him into doing any thing ill.

Keeping up this kind of superiority to the height, carries no pride in it, no temptation to pride. For, though a worthy-minded man knows every thing to be mean, in comparison of right behaviour; yet he must know too, that his own behaviour is very imperfectly right, even in the sight of men, much more of God: and were it completely so, it would still amount to no more than his bounden duty. He will therefore always proceed with great humility, though with great steadiness, in the discharge of his conscience; patiently expecting, what he will certainly find, that many other things, and some of them very bad ones, will greatly out-shine, in the eyes of the world, so plain and unpliant a qualification, as this, of uniform uprightness: which yet is indeed beyond all others the respectable one; the only ground of conscious self-approbation, of mutual esteem and trust, of public order and safety.

For, however common it is become to treat all pretence of principle as mere hypocrisy; and both to give with great gaiety, and receive with great complacency, intimations, which one should think could do neither side much credit, as if interest or inclination would induce them, or any one, to do almost any thing; yet such general representations are both false in themselves, and pernicious to human society. The worst of men are not thoroughly bad, without some mixture of good. But nothing can go farther towards making all men so, than treating it as an acknowledged point, that they are so already, and cannot be otherwise. In proportion as this doctrine prevails, no guilt will be out of countenance. Now what the consequences of that must be, is easily discerned; and the prophet hath told us very plainly: *Were they ashamed, when they had committed abomination? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush: therefore shall they fall—At the time that I visit them, they shall be cast down, saith the Lord**. Undoubtedly the wickedness of mankind is great: and those in high stations have particular opportunities of seeing it in a strong light. But still, they, who feel any good qualities in themselves, cannot justly think there are none in others. And be there ever so little probity in the world, it is our most serious interest

interest to cultivate and increase it. For what comfort, or what safety, can there be in the midst only of the profligate and abandoned? Or how shall either authority or merit support itself, if that inward reverence of duty and worth be worn out of the minds of men, without which all the solemnities of external forms will soon come to lose their influence? But if earthly tranquillity could be preserved by other means: yet heavenly happiness can be enjoyed only by souls exalted to a capacity of it; purged from every thing mean and base; and, by generous and honourable dispositions, *made meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light* *.

The third branch of the apostle's exhortation, *Whatsoever things are just*, is naturally connected with the second. Had we nothing superior in our nature to restrain us, force and fraud would be as allowable between man and man, as between brute and brute. But the consciousness which we have of peculiar dignity, includes the obligation to mutual justice, as part of itself, and yet there was need to mention this part separately; because else, the higher the notion which each entertained of his own value, the more apt he might be to overlook others, especially his inferiors, and trample upon them carelessly. Therefore St. Paul, in the text, immediately subjects the mutual behaviour of all the sons of men to one common measure; and requires, that the highest and the lowest should each treat the other, as each might expect, were circumstances changed, the other should treat him; which single precept observed would keep the world in quiet: and if it be transgressed, nothing is left to stop at short of universal confusion. Every one therefore, in every part of social life, should be vigilant against the influence of pride, and passion, and interest: should inquire with diligence, and hear with candour, in order to judge with impartiality: should remember, that nothing is truly justice, but what is equity at the same time: should do frankly and immediately what he knows he ought to do: and so temper his prudence with innocence, as always to prefer harmlessness to worldly wisdom, whenever they interfere. That others will act very differently, is so much the worse for them: but no consideration for us to be moved by in the least.

The whole we have to be concerned for, is to act right ourselves. A wise and good God will take care of the rest.

Next to justice, the apostle ranks, in the fourth place, a virtue equally flowing from the dignity of human nature, and seldom violated without grievous injustice, that of shunning the pollution of criminal pleasures, and practising *whatsoever things are pure*. Some kinds of sensual excess, as gluttony and drunkenness, are acknowledged to be contemptible, hateful vices. And however favourably too many look on the free indulgence of another appetite, at least in one sex, yet their opinion cannot alter the nature of things. Irregular gratifications must still remain what they are, dishonourable to our reason, destructive to our happiness. And it is surprising, that they, who have any rightness of mind, can fail either to discern or to reflect, what meanness it is to make these things the business of their being; and associate, for the sake of them, with the profligate and abandoned; what imprudence, to ruin or to hazard their healths, fortunes, or reputations, in such wretched courses; and what mischief, to destroy the virtue and peace of the innocent, and harden the guilty in their crimes; to violate faith and honour, distress families, embitter the nearest and tenderest relations of life, confound descents and inheritances, extend infamy, and perhaps diseases also, to successive generations. Indeed the sins of this kind have not always all these bad effects: but they undeniably produce in general, by innumerable ways, more thorough wickedness, and more exquisite misery, than almost any others. And even those transgressions of purity, that may seem the least hurtful, are so wrong in themselves, and so contrary to the good order, strength, and welfare of society; they lead on so naturally to worse; they set so dangerous an example, and give so plausible an excuse to others, for going a little and a little farther in the same way, (as indeed there is no possible ground to make a sure stand upon, if once we depart from strict virtue); that whoever considers, will be far from thinking either the precepts, or the threatenings of scripture, on this head, too rigid and severe.

But abstaining from dishonourable, and injurious, and criminally sensual actions, is by no means sufficient, unless we are careful to do becoming, beneficent, and engaging ones; or,

in the apostle's words, *whatsoever things are lovely* : which class of duties he hath put in the fifth place with great propriety. For the good-nature and agreeableness, required under this head, is not to supply the room of the justice and purity required before ; nor can possibly make amends for the want of them ; but we must first resolve to be innocent, then study to be amiable. Now the two great branches of amiable conduct are those, on which the gospel hath laid so peculiar a stress ; mildness in bearing injuries, and bounty in relieving necessities : one of them expressly made the condition of our being forgiven ; the other the foundation of our being rewarded.

But, besides these endearing virtues, the apostle undoubtedly designed to enjoin every other act of a generous and disinterested, a candid and sympathizing heart ; every instance of gentleness to the faults, and condescension to the weaknesses of men ; moderation and humility in advantageous circumstances, and patient composedness in low and afflicted ones ; every ornamental, as well as more substantial duty of life ; affability of conversation, obliging attentions, kind compliances ; whatever will make our common journey through the world mutually comfortable and pleasing, without making it dangerous ; and exhibit religion in its native cheerfulness, as a reasonable service paid to an infinitely good being. For all these things are comprehended under the character of *lovely* ; and constitute a much more valuable part of Christian practice, than many seem to be aware of. Indeed piety and virtue, however unpolished, deserve high esteem ; and it would be a most unhappy mistake, to prefer superficial accomplishments before intrinsic worth. But still, both religion and morals, disguised under a forbidding look, appear so much less to advantage, than when they wear an inviting one ; that we wrong our profession, as well as ourselves, if we neglect to shew it in as much beauty, as a modest simplicity will permit ; and thus to *adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things* *.

Nor is it enough to practise what we think right and worthy and becoming, but we ought further to respect, in a proper degree, what the rest of mankind esteem so. And there-

3 H 2

fore

fore the apostle adds in the sixth place, *Whatsoever things are of good report* : and places this head after the others ; because, if a competition arises, conscience is always to be preferred before common opinion. And indeed numberless are the poor wretches, who have been utterly ruined, by sacrificing at once their virtue and common sense to reigning sins and follies. Not that, in general, the public voice is nearly so favourable to wrong conduct, as some are willing to imagine. All, who are not guilty of it, we may be sure will disapprove it. Many who are, condemn it, even in themselves. Nay, such as encourage others in it, often censure them for it severely notwithstanding. Or, was every bad man true to his own bad cause, yet both their weight, and even their number, is less considerable, than they would have it thought. The gay and the loud, the bold and the forward, nay the great and the noble, however they fill the eye, are by no means the whole of the world : but there is reason on many accounts to look beyond these ; and inquire, what the serious and considerate, what the generality and bulk of mankind, whom it is neither modest nor prudent to despise, will think of our conduct ; what hath been the judgment of time past on the like behaviour ; what is likely to be the judgment of time to come ; when we shall be spoken of without ceremony, and have the characters that we appear to deserve, indelibly fixed on us : a matter about which we can not really be indifferent, though we may affect it.

Nor ought the opinion of mankind only to assist in deterring us from what we know to be wrong ; but restrain us from many things, that we possibly imagine very allowable. We may apprehend, perhaps, that such and such liberties have no harm in them. But if others, worthy of regard, apprehend they have ; may not we be mistaken as easily as they ? And is not the safer side the better ? Or were we sure that we judge right, is there no deference owing, in point of decency, to the contrary judgment ? especially if it be the general, the established one ? Besides, may we not endanger duties of great importance, by destroying wantonly even the slighter outworks that defend them ? May not our transgressing what is commonly esteemed sacred, lead some to esteem nothing sacred ; and others to suspect, that we esteem nothing so ? Now this latter effect alone, or any thing that approaches towards it, would

would surely be very undesirable. And they, who have no concern what they are thought to be, are in danger of having but little concern what they do.

The apostle, having thus recommended every thing that we can discover to be a law of life, and every thing accounted such by the wise and good, may seem now to have gone the utmost length that precept could go. But he had still one thing in reserve for the seventh and last place, to complete and crown the whole. Besides the constant obligations of all men, expressed hitherto; some, indeed most, on one occasion or another are qualified for actions of distinguished excellence, transcending the common measures of duty. And though none should aim at what is beyond his strength, and all should first ground themselves thoroughly in things necessary, before they aspire farther; and ever beware of doing the least evil, to bring about the greatest good: yet these precautions being observed, *If there be any virtue, and if there be any praise*; any singular opportunity for exerting superior goodness, and acquiring proportionable honour; to this also the word of God, far from discountenancing an ambition so laudable, excites and encourages in the text. Here then every one is called forth, by the voice of heaven, to every thing great and good, that shall at any time lie in his power: to serve his Creator, and benefit his fellow-creatures, the most eminently that he can, by all the means, that his knowledge and wealth, his example and persuasion, his influence and authority, can furnish out.

And blessed is that servant, whom his Lord, when he cometh, shall find so doing *.

These then are the *things* on which the apostle directs us to *think*: and the general observation which I would make upon them, in the second place, is, that we cannot think of them in earnest, as enjoined by our religion, without honouring it highly, and being strongly moved by it to every part of right temper and right conduct. Such precepts evidently prove, that Christianity is not a contrivance to make men, by faith in speculations, and exactness in observances, happy in another world, without being good in the present. Articles of belief, and institutions of worship, are instruments only: proper indeed, and appointed

ones;

* Matth. xxiv. 46. Luke xii. 43.

ones: and we must never hope to be amended or accepted, unless we take the way to be so, which God hath marked out. But neither must we hope, that a formal use of the means will be sufficient, without serious care to attain the end. *Now the end of the commandment is charity, love to God and man, out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned**; which words express the very same temper with those in the text.

If then these be the things, which mankind have need to learn, and God expects; it should be remembered, that they are taught in perfection by the scripture revelation, and the methods of acquiring them too: that neither the one nor the other, were ever taught, without revelation, either generally, or statedly, or without gross defects and errors: and that they, who reject this way of instruction and worship, have not pretended to substitute any other; but shewn, by neglecting the commands, and transgressing the restraints, of natural religion, that their disregard to Christianity proceeds from bad motives; and will produce, in proportion as it increases and spreads, the very worst effects. Whoever, therefore, is indeed concerned for true virtue and moral piety, will affectionately esteem those incomparable lessons of each, which the gospel affords him: and whoever hath at all a due sense, how very often he hath violated, on one occasion or another, the dictates of both, will rejoice from his heart in those assurances and means of forgiveness for what is past, and assistance in what is to come, with which nothing but the gospel can bless him. For, however thoughtless offenders may flatter themselves, every considerate mind must see and feel, that sin deserves punishment, and repentance is not innocence; that pardon and grace are not debts, but voluntary favours; and God alone can inform his creatures with certainty, on what terms he will bestow them, and to what degree. Now he hath accordingly informed us, that only *faith in Christ, working by love, availeth any thing* †, and that shall intitle us to every thing.

But then faith is not mere belief; nor is love mere admiration, of the advantages and promises of the gospel: but being moved by these to an uniform practice of its laws is the single
evidence

* 1 Tim. i. 5.

† Gal. v. 6.

evidence which proves their genuineness: and unhappily is the very attainment of which the generality of men fall short. Some there are, who retain the name of Christians, and seem to think it their due, though perhaps they scarce remember the time, when they performed any one act of Christian devotion, at least in private. On public worship, it may be, or some part of it, they do attend sometimes, to save appearances, or in hope of entertainment, or from a confused notion of its being, they scarce know why, a duty: but without the least conception, almost, of any further difference, between having religion, and having none. Others, that make a conscience, such as it is, of part of what they are commanded, have no regard at all to the rest: but they will be pious without virtue, or virtuous without piety; or they will chuse, just as they fancy, which of the laws of either they will obey, which they will not. Even the more truly good seldom think of aspiring to eminence of goodness: and they, who in many respects attain high perfection, often fail, most unhappily, of adding the beauty of holiness to the reality of it, by an amiable and obliging deportment and conversation. Thus it comes to pass, that some despise religion, as useless; and others are disgusted with it, as harsh and disagreeable: that not a few of its professors will find it contribute only to their heavier condemnation; and many of those who are entitled to reward will obtain a much inferior reward to what they might have done; and all owing to the neglect of thinking, as they ought, on the important virtues recommended in the text. We give much attention to low and transitory things; too much, it may be feared, to sinful and forbidden ones. We must know these excellent qualifications to be the worthiest objects of our thoughts: why should they not also be the most constantly present to them? But suppose they were, it is of no more use to think with speculative delight on the precepts, than the privileges of the gospel: but we so must consider both them and ourselves, as diligently to examine, and faithfully bring to account (for this the word *thinking on* strictly denotes in the original) our duty and our practice under each article; and compute the goodness of our condition, not by the share that we possess, either of the gay, or the solemn trifles, to which alone men commonly attend; but solely by the result of this momentuous inquiry,
made

made with great impartiality, and with earnest prayer for the divine illumination. Nor will thinking on our spiritual state, merely enough to know it, benefit us; without thinking effectually how to mend and improve it: by imploring God's pardon for every thing wrong, and ascribing to his grace every thing right in us; and asking and using his future assistance, to withstand all temptation, and increase in all goodness. *These things, therefore, think on and do: and the God of peace shall be with you*.*

Phil. iv. 9.

S E R M O N X X X V I I I .

ON THE DIVINE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE,

2 TIM. iii. 16, 17.

All scripture is given by inspiration of God: and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

MAN is by nature ignorant and thoughtless: and therefore wants information and admonition. He is also prone to evil, and averse from good: and therefore wants restraint from the former, and incitement to the latter. Without the assistance, which we receive one from another in these respects, we should be wicked and wretched beyond imagination. But though we should be most defective in a state of solitude; yet we are very deplorably so, even when joined to the best advantage in society. Many points of the utmost moment, relating both to our present and future condition, we either cannot discover at all, or not with certainty: many, which we might, not even the wiser, much less the greater part, have in fact known: and those, which hardly any could fail to perceive, all have, more or less, failed to regard. Most of these things are visibly mens own fault: and the rest are no imputation upon God. For unquestionably he may with justice place any of his creatures in as low a state, both of understanding and moral ability, as he pleases: provided he requires from them, as he certainly will, only in proportion to what he hath given. And even his infinite goodness cannot oblige him to bestow on them greater

favours, than his infinite wisdom sees to be proper: which it is no wonder should act upon reasons, to us unsearchable. But the less we have ground to expect, the more thankfully we ought to receive whatever notices, encouragements or warnings, he may vouchsafe more immediately from himself.

Now we have in our hands a book, which we call the *Bible*: containing accounts of various communications made to mankind by their Creator from the beginning; but principally through the hands of *Moses* and the prophets; of *Jesus Christ* and his disciples; together with great numbers of most important consequences from thence resulting. Both parts of this book are credibly affirmed to be written by persons, who must in the main have known the truth or falsehood of what they say: none of whom have given grounds to suspect their veracity; but many, the strongest possible grounds to rely on it. They support the authority of the doctrines and precepts delivered there by express prophecies and public miracles, recounted there also: which prophecies have, most of them, undeniably been since fulfilled, nor do any appear to have failed; and which miracles, though they could never have been acknowledged if they had not been real, were, so far as we can learn, denied by no one, either at the time when they were said to be done, or long after. On the contrary, the Old Testament hath always been admitted as true and genuine, by the whole Jewish nation: and the Pentateuch in particular, used as the law of their country; though it appoints more things than one to be done, so utterly and visibly contrary to human policy, that they must proceed from Him, whose extraordinary Providence alone could make them practicable with safety; and others, too contrary to human inclinations for men to have chosen, without being sure that God required them. And as to the writers of the New Testament, it is still more certain, that their works were published near the time and in the places, where they affirm the events, which they relate, came to pass: that they agree surprisngly well, though in general they were unlearned persons, and plainly had not concerted their story together: that they led pious and virtuous lives: that they were willing to suffer death for the sake of their testimony. And accordingly the whole Christian church from its rise embraced their narrations with a faith, which neither artifice nor persecution were able to overturn, or keep it from prevailing

prevailing throughout the world, though contrary to the favourite notions and vicious desires of all mankind: which alone is a proof, that the facts related in them, even the most miraculous, were previously known to be true; and the doctrines the same, which had been already taught by the apostles: else Jews, Heathens and Christians must have exclaimed against the authors, as publishers of falsehoods, and they could never have obtained credit. Some few of their books indeed, (but such as taught no one article that is not in the others, nor denied any one that is) were questioned in some congregations for a good while, perhaps with more caution than needed: but were then put on a level with the rest. Neither Testament is pretended to be disproved, but both are confirmed, as far as could be expected, by such heathen records as are extant: and if either had been confuted formerly by any, that are now lost, it must have sunk; which hath not been the case. Each of them furnishes powerful internal evidence in favour of itself: each adds manifold strength to the other: and no writings whatever stand on the credit of such numerous and decisive attestations.

Were we therefore to consider them merely as compositions of excellent men, well informed, and faithfully informing us, in the best manner they could, of what it most concerns us to know, we must allow them to be a most valuable blessing; a treasure unspeakably superior to all the other remains of antiquity. But this is much too low an esteem of them: they were written moreover under the special direction of heaven, and that for an end no less important, than a full supply of our spiritual wants. These two points the apostle asserts plainly in the text: and I shall endeavour to confirm and improve his assertions, by shewing, in some discourses upon it,

- I. That all scripture is of divine authority.
- II. That it completely answers every purpose of religion.
- III. That we ought to read and study it diligently.
- IV. How we may do this to the best effect.

I. That *all scripture* is of divine authority, or, in St. Paul's language, *given by inspiration of God*: a position extremely requisite to be understood in its true sense, and established on its proper foundation. For some have held it to signify, that every sentence and word was dictated from above: and consequently have made room, without intending it, for as many

plausible objections, as there are appearances of any thing, which in respect of clearness, elegance, order, strength, exceeds not human power, or falls beneath absolute perfection. Others, especially of late years, partly to guard against this danger, and partly to excuse notions of their own, which are contrary to scripture, have imagined, that being inspired meant little more (at least in relation to the historical and doctrinal books) than being indued with a large measure of general pious intention: so that, continuing to call themselves Christians, and professing a high respect for the sacred writers as good men, they have thought themselves justified in doubting, or even disbelieving, almost as much as they please, of what the scriptures teach.

To state therefore and defend the sense of the text, I shall begin with explaining the terms. The word, here translated *scripture*, denotes frequently in other authors any writing whatever. Whence some ancient versions render the original thus: *Every writing, given by inspiration of God, is profitable*, and so forth: leaving it undetermined, which are so given. But always, in the gospels and epistles, it denotes that collection of writings, which the church acknowledged for its rule of life and manners. When our apostle sent this epistle to *Timothy*, several parts of the New Testament were not published, and scarce any had spread very far: so that he must by *scripture* mean chiefly, if not solely, the Old Testament. But the books of the New, from their first appearance, obtained the same title every where. *St. Peter* gives it by the plainest implication to what *St. Paul* wrote*: and doubtless what he, and the rest of the twelve, wrote, equally deserved it. Inspiration is any particular influence of God on the mind: whence we pray in the communion service, that he would *cleanse our hearts by the inspiration of his Holy Spirit*. But, in the case before us, it must signify such influence, as will be effectual for the purpose of writing such books. And of this there may be various degrees requisite, and therefore granted, according to the variety of circumstances. Moving a person inwardly to undertake the work is one degree. Superintending him during the execution of it, so as to preserve him from any considerable mistake or omission, is another. Preserving him from

from all, even the least, is a higher still. Enabling him to express himself in a manner loftier, clearer, more convincing or more affecting, than he could have done otherwise, is yet a further step. Suggesting to him also the matter, which he shall deliver, goes beyond the former, especially if he was unacquainted with it till then. And putting into his mouth the very words he shall use, is the completest guidance that can be.

Now we say not, that God hath done all these things in every part of scripture: but so many in each as were needful. That he directed *Moses* to write his laws *, and *Isaiab* †, and *Ezekiel* ‡, and *Habakkuk* §, part at least of their prophecies, and *Jeremiab* the whole of his ||, and St. *John* the book of Revelation ¶, they themselves positively assure us: and by parity of reason we may presume it concerning the rest: nor can we doubt, but that, writing in obedience to his command, they wrote so as he approved. On some occasions perhaps they wanted, and therefore had no extraordinary assistance. Without this, the historians amongst them might relate several facts from their own personal knowledge, others from authentic records: and *Moses* might receive his accounts of the earliest ages from undoubted tradition. For tradition was much longer credible, when there were but few things to commit to memory, and there was no other way of preserving them, and two or three generations lasted many centuries. The writers of the *Psalms* might often chuse their own subjects, and treat them suitably to their own genius. The wise king, and other compilers of the *Proverbs*, might perpetuate their own maxims. The authors of the epistles may well be supposed to have given the many small directions, which we find in them, solely from the dictates of their own prudence. The authors of all the books might be trusted very commonly to use their own stile and method, (in which accordingly there is much diversity) nay, even their own illustrations, arguments and reasonings, on the points before them. And yet, amidst all this, the watchful eye of God might sufficiently provide against their misleading into error and sin, or omitting to instruct in any thing

* Exod. xxxiv. 27. Comp. xxiv. 4. Deut. xxxi. 9, 22.

† Isa. viii. 1. xxx. 8. ‡ Ezek. xliii. 11. § Hab. ii. 2.

|| Jer. xxx. 2. xxxvi. 2, 23. ¶ Rev. i. 11, 19.

thing essential, those whom they were appointed *to make wise unto salvation* *.

That he hath superintended them thus far, is evident from the necessity of his doing it. The patriarchal, Jewish and Christian revelations, which are contained, with their principal evidences, in these books, could not be known with certainty otherwise than by means of them, after some time, tho' they might at first by word of mouth. And therefore to prevent his gracious intention towards every succeeding generation from being frustrated, undoubtedly God would take care, that the scripture should teach us infallibly what he required us to believe and do: which was impossible, if his truths and the imaginations of his creatures were blended in them promiscuously: or indeed, if they were only left to express themselves as they could, properly or improperly, concerning abstruse and difficult matters, (as there are many such in the sacred writings,) where a small error in their phrase might occasion a great one in our belief or conduct. For on this supposition, how should we distinguish with safety in matters of such moment: and where shall they, who reject any one article, find a sure place to stop at? Fatal experience hath proved continually that they can find none. And consequently our wise and good Maker would effectually preserve writings of such infinite importance, not only from gross errors, but from the very smallest in faith or practice, and, one should think, in arguings and facts also: the former being often affected by the latter.

But this is not all: he must have interposed much farther. We find passages throughout, so sublime, so pathetic, full of such energy and force upon the heart and conscience; yet without the least appearance of labour and study for that purpose: indeed the design of the whole is so noble, so well suited to the sad condition of human kind; the morals have in them such purity and dignity; the doctrines are many of them so much above reason, yet all of them so reconcileable with it; the expression is so majestic, yet familiarised with such easy simplicity; that the more we read and study these books with pious dispositions and judicious attention, the more we shall

see

see and feel of the hand of God in them ; and without fixing distinctly on this or that text, be fully satisfied in the gross, that no mere men, and yet less unlearned men, as several of the writers were, could ever approach to such perfection, (far superior to that of the most admired heathens,) without being raised vastly above themselves by supernatural aid. But then if we consider also the accurate agreement and correspondence of the several parts, though of very different natures, written at very different times, under very different dispensations of religion, and scenes of worldly affairs ; that, numerous and various as they are, they unite nevertheless into one consistent and connected scheme, and the more evidently so, the stricter inquiry is made into it ; this will greatly strengthen the proof of divine suggestions, as well as restraints. For such harmony must proceed from one original plan, formed in the mind of God, portions of which only were communicated to the several publishers of it ; yet each of them was influenced from above to so punctual an execution of his respective trust, that what he said, perfectly tallied with what he was ignorant of, till at length the whole was completed by our blessed Redeemer ; *in whom all the building, fitly framed together, grew up into a holy temple in the Lord* *.

But after this general view, let us enter into some particulars. The *Mosaic* law, if at all from God, was dictated by God : for it affirms itself to be so. The contents of the prophetic books are, predictions of future events, and commissions to deliver such and such instructions to the people. These also, if true, (as the completions of the former demonstrate that they were,) must have been suggested. One of the prophets declares, that *he heard, but understood not* †. Others of them St. *Peter* describes, as *diligently searching* into the times and circumstances, to which their messages related ‡. And probably they all apprehended the meaning of a great part of them but imperfectly. Now we may be certain, that God would effectually incline them to deliver these, by using the very words which they received. And in the rest, they would of course endeavour it, and have their memories undoubtedly strengthened, as far as needed, to perform it. Some revelations

* Eph. ii. 21.

† Dan. xii. 8.

‡ 1 Pet. i. 12.

tions indeed were made to them, not by words, but by visible appearances, or impressions on their imagination. Here again we cannot question, but they were enabled to relate them in proper terms. Farther yet : many of the *Psalms* are plainly prophetic, and even the historical books contain prophecies : these also must have been suggested from above. The very histories are, some of them, such as man could not know, some such, as in all likelihood the writers did not know of themselves, or from other men : therefore God must have communicated them too. And from the beginning to the end of scripture are such numbers of things of such exalted excellency, that we may well say of the writer, concerning each of them, as our Saviour doth to St. Peter : *Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven* *.

However, as we Christians are most immediately concerned with the New Testament, and proving its divine authority singly, will prove that of the Old, which is every where asserted in it, I shall dwell upon this point more largely.

The evangelists give us not only a circumstantial account of our Saviour's journies, miracles, sufferings, resurrection, but frequent narrations of his discourses likewise : some of them very long, all of them together making up near half the gospels ; and St. *John*, who wrote the last, hath the most of them. We, who have heard and read them frequently, were we now to read one of the larger again, should scarce be able to repeat it, without considerable omissions, nay, without variations altering the sense. The disciples at the time were far from comprehending them all : it is nowhere affirmed, that they wrote any of them down, till several years after : probably some of the gospels were not published within twenty or thirty years or more. Yet a small failure in representing the doctrine of their Master, his vindications of himself, his predictions of future events, nay, any thing of moment, that he did or that befell him, (especially considering how many things were foretold concerning him) might have been extremely detrimental to Christianity. And therefore assuredly they would never have dared to specify such a variety of particulars, both said and done ; or if they had, could never have agreed so well in them,

* Matt. xvi. 17.

them, without supernatural assistance. But they well knew they should have it.

Our Saviour, before his death, promised them, that *the Holy Ghost should teach them all things, and bring all things to their remembrance, whatsoever he had said to them* *, and *guide them into all truth* †. He assured them, *it was expedient for them that he should go away*, because, till then, he could not, consistently with the purposes of infinite wisdom, send the Spirit to them ‡: whence it must follow, that by the aid of the Spirit, they were as secure from error, as if they had, (what after they were dispersed to preach the gospel was impossible) Christ bodily present with them, to ask concerning the things which they had heard or seen. He told them farther, that when they should *be brought before governors and kings to bear testimony for him, it should be given them, in that same hour, what they should speak: for, saith he, it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father, which speaketh in you* §. To pretend, that this promise means only courage and presence of mind, is contrary to all reason, and all use of scripture language. And if it means, as it evidently doth, divine superintendence; they certainly wanted, and therefore would have, at least as much of it, when they wrote books, which God foresaw (whether they did or not) must be the only standing rule of Christian faith for ever, as when they spoke occasionally before this or that heathen magistrate.

The assurances, which he vouchsafed to them, we read, were fully made good. After his resurrection he said to them, *As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you: then he breathed on them, and said, Receive ye the Holy Ghost* ||. After his ascension, they were filled with his gifts yet more abundantly, *spoke with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance* ¶; discerned the secrets of mens hearts, foretold things to come, performed the very greatest of miracles, had frequent revelations from above, seem to have done nothing of moment without an especial guidance. Surely then, they, who were thus under God's direction, did not write the New Testament without it: they who confirmed in this manner what they taught,

VOL. I.

3 K

were

* John xiv. 26.

† John xvi. 13.

‡ John xvi. 7.

§ Matt. x. 18, 19, 20. Comp. Luke xii. 11, 12. || John xx. 21, 22.

¶ Acts ii. 4.

were not capable of leaving unmentioned any fundamental truth, and yet less of teaching any error.

Now two of these, *Matthew* and *John*, apostles and companions of our Lord, are also evangelists. The latter was peculiarly beloved of our Saviour, while on earth, and afterwards saw in vision, and heard from his mouth, and that of an angel, all that is contained in the book of *Revelation*: whence we not only infer its infallible authority, but are strongly confirmed in our belief, that the Spirit of *Jesus* was present with him in writing his gospel and epistles also. The two other evangelists indeed, *Mark* and *Luke*, were not apostles: but their works were approved by St. *Peter* and St. *Paul*, who were: and all the four gospels have ever been held in equal esteem. The book of *Acts* is a sequel of the third, which the writer would not fail to lay before the same apostle, who had inspected his gospel: especially as it principally relates to him, and ends at the time when they were together at *Rome*, and at full leisure to revise it jointly.

It is true, St. *Paul* himself was not one of the twelve. But *he was not a whit behind the very chiefest of them* *; being miraculously called to *see that just one, to hear the voice of his mouth* †, and to receive his gospel, *not of man, but by the immediate revelation of Jesus Christ* ‡. Certainly then he was not suffered either to misrepresent or suppress any part of it, whether speaking or writing, or to deliver any thing, as comprehended in it, which was not. But let us hear what he saith of his own preaching. *We speak the things given unto us of God, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth* §. *When ye received the word of God, which ye heard of us, ye received it, not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God* ||. Let us hear what he saith of his own epistles. *If any man think himself a prophet or spiritual, that is, indued with supernatural gifts, let him acknowledge, that the things, which I write unto you, are the commandments of the Lord* ¶. *He therefore, that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto*

us

* 2 Cor. xi. 5.

† Acts xxii. 14.

‡ Gal. i. 12.

§ 1 Cor. ii. 12, 13.

|| 1 Thess. ii. 13.

¶ 1 Cor. xiv. 37.

us his Holy Spirit *. Yet we may be confident, that he did not boast of himself beyond his measure †, or dare to speak of any thing, which Christ had not wrought by him, to make the Gentiles obedient, by word and deed, by mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God ‡. And observe, he doth not, after all this, any where exalt himself above the other apostles: but he places all the apostles above the prophets §: which likewise in effect St. Peter doth, when having first exhorted Christians to be mindful of the words, which were spoken before by the holy prophets, he adds, in yet stronger terms, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Saviour ||. St. John also, in his first epistle, uses language, in general, of the same high import. *He that knoweth God, beareth us: he that is not of God, beareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error ¶.* Could such eminent saints, could any religious and humble, or commonly honest, men, provoke God, and attempt to deceive their fellow-creatures, by making such claims as these, without foundation? Would not he instantly have withdrawn his gifts from them? Would not their enviers and rivals, for such there were, have exposed them? Would not all Christians by common consent have rejected them? Certainly they would: yet certainly they did just the contrary.

The only two writers of the New Testament, whom I have not yet named particularly, are St. James and St. Jude: of whom it may be very sufficient to observe, that they were both apostles, and near kinsmen of our Lord, and therefore might well expect the same regard with the rest; which, by the whole tenour of their epistles, they appear to do, though without demanding it so expressly, for which they had probably no occasion.

Still we acknowledge, that some Christians at *Antioch* disputed one part of what *Paul* and *Barnabas* taught there: and afterwards, when the apostles held a council at *Jerusalem* upon it, certain *Pharisees*, who were believers, debated the same point **. But no wonder, if new converts, full of old prejudices, were backward to part with them, where the honour of

3 K 2

the

* 1 Thess. iv. 8.

† 2 Cor. x. 13.

‡ Rom. xv. 18, 19.

§ 1 Cor. xii. 28.

|| 2 Pet. iii. 2.

¶ 1 John iv. 6.

** Acts xv. 1, &c.

the law seemed to be impaired by it, considering how obstinately refractory their forefathers had been to known prophets, and to *Moses* himself. However, being with great condescension heard, then instructed by St. *James* and St. *Peter*, they submitted. Yet, we own farther, in the decree made on this occasion, where the apostles say, *It hath seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us*, they join the elders and brethren with them. But so doth St. *Paul* join one or other with him in no less than eight of his epistles *: and in both cases the meaning plainly is, not to allow them equal authority, but merely to express their concurrence.

Indeed the apostles themselves were not led into all truth at once: but this is very consistent with being secured from any error. They were also liable to act imprudently: as St. *Peter* did, when he separated himself from the *Gentiles* at *Antioch*, fearing to offend the believing *Jews*, for which St. *Paul* blamed him †; and as perhaps even *Paul* too did, when not knowing the high priest, he reproved him so severely, though deservedly ‡. But there was not the least falsehood asserted by either: and the behaviour of both turned to the advantage of Christianity. Some have objected to the inspiration of the latter, that in one place he only saith, *He thinks he hath the Spirit of God* §. But this ironical seeming doubt was designed to imply the strongest affirmation, and to put his adversaries to shame. They object also, that in the same chapter he distinguishes the directions, which Christ had given in person, from his own ||. And he doth so: but what is this more than a most amiable expression of humility, and respect to his dear Lord? A few persons have likewise apprehended, that when he saith to the *Corinthians*, *We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed* ¶; and again to the *Thessalonians*, *For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive, and remain unto the coming of the Lord, shall not prevent, go to heaven before, those which are asleep* **, he meant, that the general resurrection was to be in his days, and therefore erred. But plainly he did not: for in
his

* 1 Cor. i. 1. 2 Cor. i. 1. Gal. i. 1, 2. Phil. i. 1. Col. i. 1.

† 1 Theff. i. 1. 2 Theff. i. 1. Philem. ver. 1. ‡ Gal. ii. 1, &c.

§ Acts xxiii. 2, &c. § 1 Cor. vii. 40. || 1 Cor. vii. 12. ¶ 1 Cor. xv. 51.

** 1 Theff. iv. 15.

his second epistle to the latter, written the same year, he cautions them against misunderstanding, (as it seems they some of them had done,) what he said on that head in his first: and mentions things, which were to intervene between his own days and the resurrection, and must take up time *. In other epistles too he speaks of his own dying, first as likely †, then as certain to happen soon ‡. And therefore by *We*, in the places objected, he meant only in general, we, or such of us, Christians: not designing to intimate, that he himself should be one of the number. In this sense he frequently uses both *We* and even *I*, elsewhere, as many approved authors have done in different nations and ages.

Objections have been raised against various passages of holy writ, besides the above-mentioned. Some have been thought hard to reconcile with the moral attributes of God: some with each other. To examine them here particularly would be much too long. General observations, capable, I hope, of removing or obviating the principal difficulties, especially of the former sort, shall, God willing, be made in the sequel of these discourses. But without doing that, it might be sufficient to say, that reasonable answers have been already given to them: that many of them, which once appeared to be of the greatest importance, have been fully shewn to be of none: from whence alone we may justly presume, that whatever is wanting to clear up the rest, will be supplied in time by the blessing of God on the continued labours of pious and learned men: and that in the mean while, instead of thinking ill of the scriptures, we ought to think humbly of ourselves, and be persuaded, that in these points we do not understand them §.

Such, as were most eminent for piety and knowledge, and have enjoyed the greatest advantages for judging of scripture, have always esteemed it of divine original. The Christians of the first and second centuries, who must have known personally, whether the books of the New Testament were authentic, who had been companions of the apostles and their immediate successors, who must have been taught by them,

what

* 2 Thess. ii 1, &c.

† Phil. i. 20.

‡ 2 Tim. iv. 6

§ This last is Justin Martyr's rule, Dial. with Trypho, § 65.

what honour both testaments deserved, and would have been restrained by them from paying them too much, paid them the very highest. All, who came after, exalted them above the most valuable compositions of the most early fathers, by the strongest expressions of peculiar regard: and this regard was universal. None but the absurdest and vilest of heretics refused, and that on the poorest pretences, to be tried by their authority. All others, whatever else they differed in, agreed in acknowledging the infallibility of the bible, to which they were forced to attempt reconciling their tenets, as well as they could. In later days, we confess, Papiſts have spoken slightly of it, and libertines much worse: both however for bad reasons; because it condemns the religious notions and practices of the former, and the irreligious ones of the latter. But all unprejudiced and serious men, in proportion to their natural abilities, acquired knowledge, and attention to study it, have held it to this day in reverence: and in proportion as that reverence hath influenced their hearts and lives, have been examples and blessings to all around them.

Let us therefore walk in their steps, and be heartily thankful; first, that God hath not left us (undeserving wretches as we are) to our own conjectures and imaginations concerning what we are to believe and to do, to hope and to fear, but made gracious discoveries of himself, his will and purposes, to mankind; then, that he hath not left these discoveries to come down to us, and our posterity, through the uncertain conveyance of oral tradition, which quickly fails, or of casual writers, who might err in some points necessary, and pass by others unmentioned; but hath excited fit persons to record his truths; exalted their faculties, and strengthened their memories, where it was needful; suggested to them many things, watched over them in all. Let us receive their communications with the utmost respect, and read them with the utmost care, as the means of our salvation: and if amidst a great deal, that is highly useful and incomparably excellent, we meet sometimes with things, for which we are unable to account; let us indeed seek for solutions diligently, and be willing to admit any fair, any possible one, rather than a mistake in the sacred writings: but though we should meet with no solution, let us consider, that humble faith becomes us much better than haughty contradiction;

dition; modest suspense, than rash positiveness: for that God knows every thing, and we know little; that others perhaps now, and we ourselves after farther inquiry, may see very distinctly what at present we see not at all; and, (which alone may suffice to our satisfaction) that whatever else may be dark or doubtful, or seem exceptionable, there is abundantly enough, clearly and indisputably written, to answer the end of all; that *we may believe, that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, and that believing, we may have life through his name* *.

* John xx. 31.

S E R M O N X X X I X .

ON THE USEFULNESS OF SCRIPTURE.

2 TIM. iii. 16, 17.

All scripture is given by inspiration of God: and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

I. **I**N my preceding discourse I proved to you the divine authority of scripture; and now go on, as was proposed, to shew,

II. Its complete usefulness. This the apostle hath expressed by saying, it is *profitable for doctrine*, or teaching religious truths; for *reproof*, or confutation of the opposite notions and practices; for *correction*, that is, amendment of those, whom it reproves; for *instruction in righteousness*, that is, leading good persons on to still higher degrees of perfection.

Had the writers of it been left to themselves, yet being worthy men, and well informed of what they wrote, it would have been extremely useful. But as they were superintended by the Spirit of God, it must be unspeakably more so: in particular, because we may with absolute security rely on it in all points. Whatever it teaches, we may safely learn; and it teaches the whole of Christianity; the historical facts, the articles of faith, the rules of life, the promises, the threatenings, the exhortations, the examples. From scripture chiefly, and almost solely, we come to know, that God is infinitely perfect, and made the world; that man is fallen and redeemed;
that

that he hath eternal happiness or misery set before him; and what the means are of procuring the one, and avoiding the other. For reason could discover but little of these things, and did discover much less: and tradition is unable to convey any thing far down with certainty. In this narrow compass lies the proof, and it is a complete proof, of the benefits that we may receive from holy writ. However it hath graciously condescended to invite us to partake of them, by specifying them more distinctly. I shall only mention a few of those, which are enumerated in one Psalm, the 119th. You will judge from thence of the rest. *Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? Even by ruling himself after thy word* *. *Thy words have I hid within my heart, that I might not sin against thee* †. *Thy testimonies are my delight and my counsellors* ‡. *So shall I have wherewith to answer him, that reproacheth me: for I trust in thy word* §. *I will walk at liberty, for I seek thy commandments* ¶. *Thy statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage* ||. *The law of thy mouth is dearer unto me, than thousands of gold and silver* **. *If my delight had not been in thy law, I should have perished in my trouble* ††. *Through thy commandment I get understanding: therefore I hate all evil ways* ‡‡. *Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my paths* §§. *Thy testimonies have I claimed as mine heritage for ever: and why? they are the very joy of my heart* ¶¶. *Great peace have they, which love thy law, and nothing shall offend them* |||. These and many other advantages, which the inspired writings ascribe to themselves, are also in reason to be expected from them; the authors had experienced them; all pious men have experienced them since; every one, that will, may at this hour. And therefore I shall enlarge no farther at present on the direct evidence of them; but proceed to answer the objections of those, who are hindered by unjust prepossessions from trying them: who either contest the usefulness of scripture, in order to overturn its authority; or, which is wonderfully inconsistent, think very lowly of the former, while they acknowledge the latter. For I fear many entertain injurious opinions of the word of God, without daring to own it, even to themselves: which influence

VOL. I.

3 L

them

* v. 9. † v. 11. ‡ v. 24. § v. 42. ¶ v. 45. || v. 54.

** v. 72. †† v. 92. ‡‡ v. 104. §§ v. 105. ¶¶ v. 111. ||| v. 165.

them powerfully, though secretly, first to read, then to esteem it, less and less; then to indulge a life unsuitable to it, and perhaps in the last place to reject it entirely. These ensnaring sentiments therefore I shall plainly bring forth into your view without disguise, and confute them; that you may have answers ready to the bad suggestions of other men, or your own minds.

It is said then, that these books are not in our own language, but in translations, which most of us must take upon trust, and which often differ. But have men the least pretence to say, that God shall not instruct them, unless he will convey his instructions to them in all the several tongues of the several countries and ages of the world? Is it not better, that he should give them in any one, than in none? Are we not informed by translations of the most important events, that have passed formerly upon earth? Do not most of the subjects of some large empires to this day learn the will of their sovereign from translations? And what if the translations of some parts of scripture vary? They agree in the main: and there can be no gross impositions; because the clergy of one communion will be sure to detect those of others in such attempts; and there are multitudes of learned laity also in lands of freedom; and it is the common interest of all persons not to be deceived.

It is said further, that one should expect a book, written by direction from God for instructing the world in religion, to be a short plain methodical system of belief and practice, unincumbered with any other matters: and the bible is quite a different thing. But is not the whole system of nature, and the whole conduct of Providence, quite a different thing from what one should have expected? Had we been set to imagine before-hand, what sort of a world God would create, and in what manner he would govern it; we should none of us have pitched on such a creation and government, as we see in fact: but had the scheme of either come into our thoughts, we should probably have fancied there were innumerable and insuperable objections against it. And hence we should learn, that, in the case of revelation also, our fancies are not the measure of God's proceedings; but we are humbly to acquiesce in whatever it appears by proper evidence that he hath done, and not erect ourselves into judges of what he ought to do, or in what manner. Hear his own words: *My thoughts are not*
your

your thoughts neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts *. The proceedings of divine wisdom will always justify themselves to human inquiry, so far as we are capable of comprehending them. But of necessity many of God's actions must be infinitely more beyond our reach, than the actions of a prudent man are beyond that of a little child. And were the whole plan of scripture such, as in our first crude notions we should have conceived likely; that very circumstance would have furnished a presumption against it: whereas now we have cause to look on it with that reverence, which the Psalmist expresses: *Thy testimonies are wonderful: therefore doth my soul keep them* †. However let us enter a little more particularly into the merits of this plea.

The instruction given us in the bible, we are told, is not ranged in a just method: but we are to pick out the doctrines and precepts of it often from the midst of histories and prophecies, and put them together as we can. But is not the natural instruction, which God gives us, just of the same sort? Are we not obliged to gather almost the whole of it, from hints and intimations afforded by objects dispersed through the earth: from observations, experiments and reasonings of persons, who have lived in different countries and ages? Yet these are undeniably the means, which he hath appointed to furnish us with one part of our knowledge. And why then may not the scripture, notwithstanding its apparent want of order, be the means, which he hath appointed to furnish us with another part? It is alledged yet farther, that some very curious and interesting things are entirely omitted, or but briefly hinted there: while some very obvious ones are inculcated, and repeated without end. But curious things are part of them probably unfit to be known perfectly at present: and we may well be content to *see now through a glass darkly*, since hereafter we shall *see face to face* ‡. Again, such of them, as may properly be known, are useful in comparison to few; who also will seek after them with more spirit, and discover them with more joy, when they must *search for them as for hid treasures* §: whereas plain things are useful for all; and

3 L 2

therefore

* Isa. lv. 8, 9.

† Prov. ii. 4.

‡ Psalm cxix. 129.

§ 1 Cor. xiii. 12.

therefore should be easily found : for most minds cannot labour. Besides, consider how it is in worldly things : look around you : are not matters of small price, but great utility, the commonest ? And must not they, who will have things that are curious and rare, seek after them with difficulty, and pay dear for them ? Farther, had every thing in the bible been easy of access to us, in proportion as we were likely to place a value upon it ; we should soon have looked it through, then have laid it down ; and seldom taken it up again : whereas now we return to it over and over, in fresh hopes of discovering something more : and at each reading, we meet, whether we will or not, with the commonest indeed, but most necessary doctrines and precepts, in such a variety of lights assisting each other, and they are sometimes impressed so suddenly and advantageously upon us, that if our understandings are not gratified with the most beautiful arrangement, and most entertaining speculations, our hearts are however excited to acts and habits of faith and virtue with the strongest efficacy. Besides, repetitions might be extremely necessary in different books, written at different times : and may be very useful even now, when these books are laid before us all at once, to inculcate what after all we learn insufficiently.

But further yet : The scripture is not indeed a plan of Christianity, finished with minute accuracy, to instruct men as in something altogether new to them, which it was not ; or to excite a vain admiration in them : but it is somewhat unspeakably nobler, and more extensive ; comprehending in the grandest and most magnificent order, along with every essential of that plan, the various dispensations of God to mankind from the forming of this earth to the consummation of all things. It begins with the ground-work of natural religion, the creation of the universe by one holy and good and wise being : relating distinctly, how all those parts of it, which the heathen worshipped as Gods, were in truth the work of God's hands. It proceeds to the origin of the Patriarchal, *Jewish* and Christian religion, the introduction of sin by the fall of our first parents, of which we experience the wretched effects. It goes on to that amazing punishment of sin, the universal deluge, proved to be as certain, as it was wonderful, by the remaining traces of it throughout the globe. It then recites the second peopling of the world, the relapse of mankind into wickedness, the
choice

choice of one family and people to preserve the knowledge of God, and to be as *a light shining in a dark place* *, for the benefit of all about them, that would turn their eyes and feet to the way of peace. It lays before us the laws given to this people. It recounts their history, chiefly with regard to their moral and religious behaviour, and dwells on the characters and actions of their most remarkable persons. It supplies us with admirable patterns of genuine piety in the *Psalms*, most virtuous instructions for the prudent conduct of life in the book of *Proverbs*, for bearing afflictions in that of *Job*, for thinking justly of wealth, honour, pleasure, science, in *Ecclesiastes*. Then in the prophetic books it gives us, together with the sublimest and worthiest ideas of God, and our duties towards him, the most affecting denunciations of that private and public misery and ruin, which will ever attend sin, whether cloaked by superstition, or displayed in profaneness. And, along with all these things, it unfolds a series of predictions, reaching from the beginning of the Old Testament to the end; and growing, from obscure and general, continually clearer and more determinate; concerning the appearance of a divine person on earth, for the recovery of fallen man, the revival and propagation of true religion throughout the world. The books of the New Testament open to us the execution of this great design. The gospels record his supernatural birth, his unspotted and exemplary life, his astonishing and gracious miracles, his pure and benevolent doctrine, his *dying for our offences*, and *rising again for our justification* †, his mission of fit persons, endued with the gifts of the Holy Spirit to *teach all nations* ‡, his own ascension into heaven, and sitting at the right hand of God, till he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. The *Acts of the Apostles* relate the wonderful success of their preaching, and the original foundation of the Catholic church. The *Epistles* contain their admirable directions to clergy and laity. And the *Revelation* concludes with foretelling the state of Christianity, primitive, degenerate and reformed, to the last ages. Can there now be a grander, a more comprehensive, a more useful scheme of instruction than this? And doth not the uniformity and variety joined through the whole of it, which, as I have already shewn you, gives evidence of its

* 2 Pet. i. 19.

† Rom. iv. 25.

‡ Matth. xxviii. 19.

its coming from God, give it also inexpressible beauty? And what then if smaller parts, in so vast a work, appear in some disorder, barren and neglected? Do we not see the same appearance of neglect, here and there, through all the works of nature? Yet they are the productions of an all-wise being. Are we not even struck with it, as majestic and graceful in human performances? And why do we object against it in the word of God? Or by what right do miserable sinners claim, that their Maker, if he sends them declarations of his will, and offers of pardon, shall polish every article to their liking, or subjoin his reasons to each part, when his authority is fully sufficient?

But to obviate more distinctly objections against the profitability of scripture, let us examine more particularly the several sorts of books that compose it. In the earlier historical parts, amongst many most important accounts of ancient time, which we can learn nowhere else, there are some things imperfectly related. But perhaps the writer knew them but imperfectly: and God was not bound to give him a fuller knowledge. The persons for whom they were primarily written, understood them sufficiently by means of what is said: and we have no right to understand more of them than we do, indeed not so much. Other passages again seem of small consequence; but they might be of far greater formerly. The genealogies of those by whom the earth was first peopled, and of considerable families in succeeding ages, even the dry catalogues of names, were, at the time of their being recorded, and long after, partly confirmations of the truth of the history, partly notices of things very interesting. The division of the land of *Canaan* in *Joshua*, the list of descents in the beginning of *Chronicles*, were titles to inheritances. The pedigree of the *Levites* was necessary to regulate their ministrations: that of the posterity of *David*, to ascertain the birth of the Messiah. If these, and other parts of the narration, are not equally agreeable or instructive now, it is easy to pass them over. We have no ground to complain of losing the entertainment or information, which others formerly had from them: for we are abundantly recompensed by being taught many most material things, of which men in those days were ignorant. Yet neither had they any just ground to complain. For God may full as consistently with all his attributes communicate more to one than to another by revelation,

revelation, as by their natural abilities, and situation in life. The discoveries, which he hath made in scripture, are progressive; some to one age, greater to the next: and those which he hath decreed to be made by natural reason, are in this respect of the same kind. Every generation goes off unacquainted with a number of desirable and beneficial things, which the succeeding ones come to know familiarly.

It is farther alledged, that we read in the bible of very bad actions, done by such as are called very good persons: and men are in danger of being misled by them. But are they not in almost equal danger of being misled by seeing good persons do bad actions almost every day? And if this is no objection against the providence of God, why is the other against his word? Sometimes the connection of the story requires them to be told: and they are seldom, if ever, told without a censure, either expressed or visibly implied, unless the sin be so very notorious as to need none. At least the precepts of the sacred books are a guard, more than sufficient, against the ill influence of any such histories: which will never do harm, provided we remember but this one plain rule, that nothing contrary to moral virtue is or can be designed to be taught there. On the contrary, they may serve to various useful purposes. Recording the sins of those, who in the main were eminently pious, is one proof, amongst many, of the impartiality of the writers; and furnishes every reader with strong motives, to circumspection, lest he also fall to repentance, when he hath fallen; to humility in thinking of himself; to charity in respect of others, who *are overtaken in faults* *.

There are likewise, it must be owned, actions not only related in scripture, but related with the appearance, nay with expressions, of approbation, and even said to be commanded by God, that seem at the first view liable to great objections in point of morality. And these are pleaded by some against its authority, by others against its usefulness. But then it must be observed, as to such commands, that God hath a sovereign right to dispose of all his creatures as he pleases; that he may have many reasons for his pleasure, of which we are ignorant; that he may as allowably appoint any person or people to execute it, as the civil magistrate may appoint an executioner of common justice; and that

* Gal. vi. 1.

that by virtue of such divine appointments, well proved, as those in scripture are, things may be very lawfully done, which otherwise would be very unlawful; and which therefore were not intended, (nor can easily be mistaken, if we will use our understandings at all) for patterns to be followed where no revelations are given; and in our days none are to be expected. Such, for instance, was the command to *Abraham* for sacrificing his son; to the *Jews* for destroying the *Canaanites*; and to other persons on other occasions. Again, sometimes God is represented by the sacred writers not only as commanding, but as doing himself, things hard to reconcile with his attributes. But then plainly on several occasions scripture seems to say, that he doth, what it only means to say, that he permits: because nothing is done without him, and every thing is overruled by him to his own good purposes. Time will not permit me to enter into every particular: and therefore I must be content to add in general, that if we bear always in mind, as we ought, the absolute sovereignty of God, and the unsearchable depths of his wisdom; if we allow for circumstances, probably well known when the history of these facts was written, and therefore less needful to be related; or indeed if we only pay due regard to circumstances, which are related, in that very part of scripture, or some other; we shall either find the means of clearing up the difficulties of this nature which occur, especially by calling in proper help; or however we shall perceive it to be likely, from the discoveries which have been made already, that they will be cleared up hereafter. And reflect, I entreat you, what can we say more than this, concerning several parts of God's creation, which seem to be noxious instead of beneficial, and of his Providence, which seem hurtful to the interests of piety and virtue; and yet undoubtedly proceed from him, and are worthy of him? To one use at least, and that of the greatest moment, all such things are adapted, to teach us, from a sense of our own ignorance, deep self-abasement, and implicit veneration for the Lord of all.

Another part of scripture, pretended by some to be unprofitable and unaccountable, is that which lays before us the ceremonial precepts of the *Jewish* law. But no wonder, if when we are not bound to practise any of them, we are not able to account for all of them. Some, which appear to the illiterate very strange, are proved by the learned to be wise prohibitions

of

of the superstitions and idolatrous rites of their heathen neighbours; and others to be equally wise compliances with, or accommodations to, their innocent customs. And how do we know, at such a distance of time, what a number more there may have been of this kind? Some again seem designed to convey, under their literal sense, figurative moral instructions; that being a method of teaching anciently admired, and therefore proper to be imitated*. Not a few were plainly contrived to give intimations beforehand concerning the facts and doctrines of the gospel: very comfortable at the time, though obscure, as God saw fit they should be; very useful now, by proving, what was always the divine intention; and particularly useful against the *Jews*, who thus bear testimony to the very books that confute them. Besides, it might be, independently on all this, extremely necessary for that carnal people to be employed in a pompous form of piety with many ceremonies: which, however, they had sufficient means of knowing were of no avail, without inward goodness. And the conducting of religion in purity, through such a state of things, is no small evidence, that the hand which conducted it was God's. But were the communication of these ritual appointments to us no otherwise advantageous, it would shew us the happy superiority of our own condition, who *worship God* without them *in spirit and in truth*†. But lastly, the Pentateuch, which contains them, contains over and above many things of unspeakable importance, not only to the proof, but the understanding of Christianity. We must have both conveyed down to us in it, or neither. Which would we chuse? And where is the injury, if in order to give all that is profitable, our Maker gives more than is necessary?

Exceptions have been also taken to the book of *Psalms*, as having in it frequent imprecations against enemies, which may tempt us to the like. But most of them, if not all, might fall as agreeably to the genius of the *Hebrew* language, have been translated as predictions only‡, which in the case of sinners

VOL. I.

3 M

being

* Concerning symbolical laws, and the unsiteness of requiring to know the reasons of ancient institutions, see Authorities of the Pandects, and passages of heathen writers, in *Taylor's Elements of Civil Law*, p. 45, 46, 47.

† John iv. 23, 24.

‡ Gregory the Great, *De Cura Pastoral.* Part i. c. i. p. 5. saith, the Psalmist wrote *Pf. lxxvii. 23. non optantis animo, sed prophetantis ministerio.*

being generally conditional (to take effect unless they repent) were in reality nothing more than warnings, and therefore kindnesses indeed to the offenders against whom they were denounced. Or if the holy penmen were sometimes commissioned by inspiration to foretell absolutely, and even to call down the judgments of God on wicked persons, how can this be likely to mislead us, who know such commissions to be ceased, and our standing rule to be, *Bless, and curse not* *.

It hath been objected too against the book of *Ecclesiastes*, that some passages in it favour of irreligion, some of immorality. But these in truth are either innocent, when rightly interpreted; or else express, not the wise king's sentiments, but the false opinions of others, whom he personates to confute them; or however not his deliberate sentiments, but such hasty wrong notions, as during the course of his inquiry after happiness rose up successively in his mind, and were on mature consideration rejected by him, to fix at last on the true basis, *the conclusion of the whole matter, to fear God, and keep his commandments, because he shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil* †.

The *Song of Solomon* hath likewise given offence to readers of more delicacy than judgment. But they would do well to recollect, that the intimate relation between God, or Christ, and the church, is figured by that between husband and wife in many places, both of the Old and New Testament, particularly in the 45th Psalm, which (though the scene of it be laid in higher life, seems to have given occasion to this Song; that very endearing and improving reflections naturally rise from so interesting a comparison; that describing the intercourse by metaphors drawn from the pastoral state, is extremely agreeable to the simplicity, the humility, the mildness of religion; that the devotional, as well as other affections of the eastern people, are extremely warm; and that none of their allegories (especially such a one as that in question) are ever to be applied minutely: but we are to lay hold and dwell on the principal points; of love to God, producing felicity; negligence, desertion; penitence, forgiveness: considering most of the rest as mere ornament, adapted with much condescension to the turn of the nation and the age.

But

* Rom. xii. 14.

† Eccl. xii. 13, 14.

But difficulties have been raised in relation to the prophetic books, as well as these. Directions, it is said, are mentioned, as given in them to the prophets, which appear improbable and unfit. But then we may justly think, as the ablest of the *Jews* themselves have thought, that several of these were executed in vision only: a supernatural impression was made on their minds, by which they seemed to do what in fact they did not, that so they might be enabled to deliver their message in a more affecting manner. And who shall prescribe to God how to communicate his revelations? Other strange things, really done by them, were done in consequence of the universal custom, then in use, of instructing persons by actions, which are natural signs, along with, or instead of, words, which are but arbitrary ones. And if that custom had not been so proper and convenient, as perhaps it is; yet God's compliance with it, whilst it obtained, was undoubtedly gracious, and fitted to produce good effects.

Again, some have complained, that the language of the prophets, above the rest of scripture, is often harsh and coarse, dark and peculiar; and, on these accounts, ill adapted to common benefit. But surely it is also, very often, extremely natural and easy, convincing and persuasive, alarming and forcible, graceful and engaging. Wherever it seems exceptionable therefore, large allowances must be made for the boldness and consequent obscurity of the original tongue, especially in poetry: which yet in all tongues is more affecting, and more easily remembered, than prose; and, on these accounts, prudently chosen in many parts of the prophetic writings. But indeed the style of the oriental people on every subject, except in their history, is lofty and concise, abounding in strong and expressive figures, carried often to strange lengths, above regarding the little niceties that we think so essential, full of quick turns and abrupt transitions. Without such ornaments as these a composition would appear languid and despicable to them; who, being the persons originally and immediately interested in the sacred books, ought surely to be more considered than we, who come so long after. And yet even we, with due attention, may discover, not only the utmost sublimity of sense, in the hardest passages, but the most exquisite beauties of speech, profusely scattered throughout, like the riches of nature thro' the globe; though, like them too, with a magnificent negli-

gence and irregularity, which little wits ridicule, and great ones admire; and pious hearts very justly reverence, as the worthier of God, the remoter it is from the laboured correctness of man. But had the *Jewish* language (while they spoke *Hebrew* or *Chaldee*, or when afterwards many of them spoke *Greek*) been still more obscure and ambiguous than we must own it to be, and had that defect been less compensated with the advantages of expressiveness and grandeur than it is, yet this was not the fault, either of the prophets, or of the apostles. They would of course learn and use the stile of their countrymen: they wrote probably as well in it, as any other good men of their time: and God was not bound to teach them to write better. For how far he would extend his aid, was entirely in his own choice: and we owe him inexpressible gratitude for the *things* he hath communicated, how little soever he might interfere in directing the *words*. But indeed had they been endued with ever so great excellency of speech, they could have applied to their hearers or readers in no other phrases, than such as they comprehended, were accustomed, and would hearken to: and the difficulties arising from hence in the sacred writings were unavoidable.

But here a farther complaint is made, that in several places they are designedly guarded against being clearly understood. And we own they are: for the subject required it. Predictions too plain might hinder their own execution: as, in many common cases, the previous publication of a thing, which else would certainly have been done, will prevent it most effectually. And therefore they ought to be formed in the manner they are: so as not to betray the intention to every one prematurely, nor yet leave room to any one for doubting afterwards, to what event the prophecy related. Had all the particulars of our Saviour's life and death, which are foretold, been too distinctly set forth to be mistaken or overlooked, the *Jews* would have taken care they should not happen; and have justified their rejection of him by the failure. Again: had the kingdom of the Messiah been every where described by the prophets as intirely a spiritual one, in which all mankind were to have an equal share; that perverse nation, on hearing that their civil polity and ceremonial worship was all to be abolished, would either, from contempt, have grown negligent of it, and thrown it off too soon; or else, from fondness for it, would

have

have suppressed or corrupted the passages, declaring it should cease: which Providence designed them to preserve, for an evidence against themselves, as they have proved to be. And therefore the gospel days are prefigured by a mixture of temporal images with others, liable to be misunderstood before the time of explanation came, but soon apprehended then by every fair mind; though still open to the cavils of others, who, to use the terms of St. Peter, *stumble at the word, being disobedient, whereunto also they were appointed* *. Not appointed to be disobedient: but appointed, since they would be disobedient, to take their own course and the consequences of it: to *stumble* and fall at difficulties, of which they would easily have seen the proper solution, and so got over them unhurt, had they but modestly begged, and dutifully followed, the divine illumination.

I cannot proceed now to the objections, which have been raised against the usefulness of the books of the New Testament: and therefore contenting myself at present with recommending to your consideration what you have heard, shall conclude with the comfortable, yet awful words of the prophet: *Who is wise, and he shall understand these things? prudent, and he shall know them? For the ways of the Lord are right, and the just shall walk in them, but the transgressors shall fall therein* †.

* 1 Pet. ii. 8.

† Hof. xiv. 9.

S E R M O N X L.

ON THE USEFULNESS OF SCRIPTURE,

2 TIM. iii. 16, 17.

All scripture is given by inspiration of God: and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

HAVING undertaken to shew you,

- I. That scripture is of divine authority;
- II. That it answers every purpose of religion;
- III. That we ought to read and study it diligently;
- IV. How we may do this to the best effect:

I have finished the first head, and made some progress in the second, the complete usefulness of holy writ. The direct evidence of this I laid before you, fully I hope, though briefly, for it lies in a small compass: by proving, that in the nature of the thing, books inspired to give men the knowledge of religion must be in the highest degree profitable for that end; by specifying their own express declarations, that they are so; by referring you to the experience of innumerable multitudes, that have found them so. Then I proceeded to answer the several objections raised against the truth of this assertion: some of them general, that the bible is not so short, so plain, so methodical as one should have expected for the benefit of mankind; some again particular, and levelled against several things recorded in its several parts. To these I give solutions, as far as the Old Testament was concerned. Let us now go on to the New.

The

The history of our Saviour is written there by four evangelists. And some tell us their narrations differ in so many things, that the reading of them is perplexing, and even their authority doubtful. But what are these things? The words, related in one evangelist, as spoken on such or such an occasion, vary from those in another. But perhaps the words, that are in each, were spoken successively: or each puts the *Hebrew* words, which he heard, into his own *Greek*, by a stricter or a freer translation, but still without altering the sense. Again, one sets down facts, which another omits. But this is no proof of contradiction. For they professedly omit many facts, which they knew to be real. One of them passes over things, because another before him had related them. Hence probably *St. Matthew* and *St. Mark* omit several particulars which are in *St. Luke*, who wrote first. And *St. John*, who came last, supplies a great deal, which the others have not, and writes very little which they have; excepting the history of our Saviour's death and resurrection, which it was fit they should all have. Thus no single gospel containing every thing, (though it did contain every thing necessary) each of them was shorter, and therefore much more commodiously obtained at first, when books were written very slowly, and sold very dear; so that he who could not procure the four, might however furnish himself with one: and we may now have the joint benefit of them all. But farther, when they seem to be relating the same fact, the circumstances differ. And they may be different, yet consistent. Or if they be inconsistent, they are two facts, and not one, though in some respects alike. For our Saviour might, at various times, both perform miracles and deliver discourses, nearly akin, and yet really distinct. Still after all, even allowing for these things, it is not easy to make an orderly history of our Saviour's life and instructions out of the four evangelists. For they did not think it, nor was it always, requisite, to mark down the order, in which things happened. They might for one good cause or other, relate such of them together, as were not done together: but then, as they do not say they were, this is no falsehood. And learned men, agreeing in the main, though not in all particulars, have brought them to a harmony each with the other, only by allowing a very few things to have been transposed in one of them. But were the attempt harder than it is, our edification from our Saviour's

Saviour's discourses depends very little on the time, or place, or other circumstances, of their delivery. Common persons need not attend to such points at all: and persons of more ability will find both a trial of their impartiality, and a reward of their labour, in studying them. Indeed were the ablest men incapable of reconciling all difficulties, it doth not follow, that they are irreconcilable. Or though they were, the consequence would be only, that the divine superintendency, under which the authors wrote, extended not to such minute circumstances, though it did and must to doctrines and precepts, and principal facts *. Not very much therefore would be lost by this: and one advantage would be gained; that these diversities would still more evidently shew, (what indeed the whole air and manner of their writings shews) that the evangelists are absolutely free from all imputation of concerting their story together, to deceive mankind: the assurance of which makes good amends in respect of usefulness, for any perplexities we may find in adjusting their accounts.

Another complaint is, that our Saviour's parables, which make up a considerable part of his doctrine in the three first evangelists, are obscure, and some of them purposely made so: and that a great deal of what he saith in the fourth is not clearer. But it should be considered, that parables were not only an admired way of teaching then, but a valuable one in their own nature; as they excite attention, please the imagination, and fasten upon the memory. And nothing can be more intelligible, or more beautifully persuasive, than most, if not all, of our Saviour's parables, and other discourses, are now, and were in a very short time after his own days. Some of both indeed appeared, and were designed to appear, otherwise, when he spoke them. But these were accommodated with the utmost prudence, for letting in light upon his hearers by gentle degrees, which, if poured on them all at once, would have been too strong for many persons of good meaning, but whose prejudices required to be gradually worn off; and would have furnished handles to bad people, for decrying him successfully, and destroying him, before his ministry had taken due root. Perhaps it may be thought, that to the later some of his censures

* Concerning this matter see Gaussen, *de verbo Dei*, § 64, &c. See also Archbishop Potter's lectures, p. 141, &c. where the opinions of Erasmus, Episcopus, Grotius, &c. are stated.

fures were too severe, and some of his answers not direct enough. But they came from one, who knew the hearts of men, and spoke to what he saw there. The persons, to whom these censures, or these answers, were particularly directed, felt the propriety of them, though possibly the rest, even of the by-standers, were unable to perceive it: no wonder then, if we are less able. And yet the writers of the gospels could do no otherwise, than set down what he said, just in the manner that he said it, however dark it might be to us, or to themselves.

But his precepts also, as well as others in scripture, are said by some to be so general and undetermined, that without proper limitations of them, (which all men will not think of making, and few can make in every case rightly) they must either lead us into errors, or leave us uncertain what we are to do. Yet concise maxims of sententious wisdom have always been esteemed in all nations extremely useful, notwithstanding that somewhat remained to be supplied in them by the common sense of the hearers or readers: which must indeed be done, more or less, in every thing written or spoken. And a book, that should be framed to give rules of action in all the particular circumstances of every case that would happen, would be much too voluminous for vulgar use, and too intricate for vulgar understandings: whereas rules that set the heart right in the principal points, will go a great way towards setting the conduct right in all. Besides, there is in general very small danger, that precepts of piety and morals will be taken in too comprehensive and severe a sense. And therefore the main business is, to make them comprehensive and severe enough, which it will be allowed the scripture hath done: and yet with such openings for the rational interpretation of them, that there is no one command, in the gospels or elsewhere, of which the most illiterate person, who is at all attentive and discreet, may not sufficiently apprehend the just bounds; either by his own comparison of them with other texts, or however by the help of such farther instruction and explication, as in worldly affairs men are well content to ask and receive, and would scarce know any one thing upon earth without it. If people have not ability and leisure enough to find out their duty, from the directions in the bible, much less would they ever deduce the whole, or any considerable part of it, from its

first principles, by the mere light of nature. And whatever pretences are made, that the injunctions of scripture are not determinate enough, the true inward objection commonly is, that they are too determinate against some favourite inclinations: whereas, were men left to make a system for themselves, they could easily mould and bend the laws of conduct to their own liking.

Against the usefulness of *the Acts of the Apostles*, which is evidently very great, I think there are no peculiar exceptions taken, worth mentioning here. For the difficulties, raised on some points of history in the speeches of St. *Stephen* and *Camaliel*, are not material, and have been sufficiently cleared up. But heavy charges are brought against the epistles of St. *Paul*, authorized, we are told, by St. *Peter* himself, who affirms, that *some things in them are hard to be understood, which the unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction* *. But doth St. *Peter* mean here to censure St. *Paul*; whom he calls, in the preceeding verse, his *beloved brother*; who, he saith, *hath written according to the wisdom given unto him*, that is from above; and to whose writings he refers Christians for fuller instruction concerning what he himself is teaching? Certainly not, unless he censures the other scriptures too: for he speaks of them all in just the same terms. And therefore he only gives a caution concerning passages, which, either from the abstruseness of the subject, the impropriety of explaining it fully at that time, or God's purpose of trying the reader's fairness of mind, were involved in some obscurity. And even of these he doth not say, either that not understanding them at all would be dangerous; (for, though useful truths, they might come short of necessary ones, or might be more intelligibly taught elsewhere;) or that all persons would be in danger from understanding them wrongly; but only *the unlearned*, that is, unacquainted with the doctrines of religion, for he speaks of no other learning; and *the unstable*, or unsettled in their dispositions, who have no root of steadfastness in faith or practice. Nor doth he say of these, that weakly mistaking such passages might be *their destruction*, but violently *wresting* and torturing them, to ill senses, for ill purposes. By usage of this kind, a hard text or two may be wickedly

* 2 Pet. iii. 16.

wickedly perverted to contradict ever so many plain ones, in the most necessary articles of belief or duty : and the condemnation of such as do it, and persist in it, is just. But how can any argument be drawn from hence, to disprove the usefulness of the sacred books? The books of nature and Providence, it will surely be owned, are useful, and to be read by all men. Yet are there not, in them likewise, *things hard to be understood, which the unlearned and unstable*, which the most learned and best grounded, (in their own opinions) *wrest* to the service of atheism, infidelity, superstition, immorality ; and so ruin themselves in the next life, perhaps in this too?

Doubtless the epistles of *St. Paul* are in many places difficult. In some he pours out the abundance of his knowledge and piety so copiously, that common capacities are unable to receive it all, seem lost amidst the profusion of it, and are forced to let a great deal flow by unapprehended, at least till after frequent attentive readings ; in every one of which however they imbibe most refreshing and strengthening nourishment. Sometimes again, indeed often, he visibly refers to the then present state of the several churches ; to various questions, which they had proposed to him ; to customs entertained by them ; to erroneous notions, remaining, or started up amongst them : which notions too he appears to confute, now and then, by reasonings taken from other notions of theirs, possibly some of them erroneous likewise, or however doubtful ; that so, by entangling them in their own mistaken persuasions, they might be induced to throw them all aside, and take up juster and more consistent principles. Now as we have no other knowledge of these things, in our days, than we can collect from the epistles themselves ; no wonder, if we are sometimes much at a loss. But to the persons who received them, we have cause to think, they were very intelligible : and the condescension of arguing with them in their own way must be very obliging, and the effect of the whole thoroughly convincing : else they had not continued to honour him and his writings in the manner and degree, which we know they did. Nor is it very hard for us now to understand the far greatest part of them : and the profit well repays the labour. But the parts of more general and especially practical use, which make a large share of the whole, we cannot avoid understanding. So that on the whole his own words concerning his teaching are perfectly

justifiable: *If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost, in whom the God of this world hath blinded the minds of them that believe not* *.

To the epistles, which follow *St. Paul's*, no considerable objection is made. For, as to any pretence of difference between him and *St. James*, about faith and works, the former evidently means only, that neither observance of the peculiarities of the *Mosaic* law, nor the exact observance of any law, is requisite for our acceptance with God, but faith in his covenant of forgiveness through Christ: and the latter means only, that this faith must be such, as produces an honest and diligent, though not faultless, performance of such works, as that covenant prescribes; otherwise it is dead and fruitless: which two doctrines are perfectly consistent, and absolutely necessary to the comfort and direction of mankind.

The concluding book of scripture, *the Revelation of St. John*, is accused of obscurity, and consequently of uselessness, perhaps beyond any other. But it should be observed in regard to this and all of them, that it may be very material, in religion as well as in philosophy, to have some information about matters, which yet we can understand but very imperfectly: and tho' there were more things than there are, not at all understood now; yet these either have been understood by those, whom they concerned formerly, or will be understood by those, whom they shall concern hereafter: as unquestionably in nature many things, which have never been cleared up, nor their uses known as yet, will be cleared up in time to very good purpose. And who can tell how glorious a light may one day burst forth, and how seasonably, from the darkest and least regarded prophecies both of the Old Testament and the New, to confirm the evidence and illustrate the doctrines of Christianity? But in the mean while, they exercise very beneficially the industry of many, the humility and reverence of all. Though we should never find the meaning of some of them, we may, by searching after it, find that of others unexpectedly, as happens in various cases besides. And further still, be some parts of scripture ever so unintelligible, we have this comfort, that they cannot make the clear ones unintelligible too.

Yet here it is answered by the bolder sort of objectors, that

no
3

no body can say, what is clear in scripture : there are diversities of opinion about the most fundamental points of revelation. Every thing is disputed ; every disputant alledges what he calls plain texts in his favour : and how can there be a stronger proof, than this from fact, that the whole system of the bible is obscure and uncertain, and therefore of little use ? But consider : Are not the fundamental points of natural religion, of morality, of civil government disputed too ? Have not all the principles of science, the credibility of history, the very evidence of sense, been controverted ? And doth not every body appeal to plain reason in these controversies, just as they do to plain scripture in those of theology ? And do they not all make a shift to say something plausible for themselves, or against their adversaries ? And will not this be always the case, as long as there are in the world conceited or perverse, ignorant or inconsiderate, interested or ambitious persons ? But must we therefore give up every thing for doubtful and useless ? Or if not, why must we give up scripture ? Why not trust ourselves, that we see what we do see, there no less than elsewhere, notwithstanding that there may be persons, who pretend to see the contrary ? Infidels venture to be very positive in their notions, though the ablest, the best, the generality of men reject them, though they differ widely amongst themselves about them ; though, when searched to the bottom, they are unspeakably more difficult to understand, and more unsatisfactory, so far as they are understood, than ours. Why then do we suffer them to unsettle us by pleas, that hold stronger against themselves.

Another very material consideration is this. However dark and perplexing some would have the bible thought, in fact it is certain, that wherever it hath been respected and carefully read, the very lowest of the people have had infinitely juster sentiments of God and their duty, than the highest in other places. The passages, which it is pretended must needs give them wrong and gross ideas, of the divine nature and attributes for instance, of a future state, or of any thing else, do in reality scarce ever produce that effect in any of them ; but either they understand the boldest figures easily, or at least know they are but figures : and therefore though they may not apprehend them distinctly, they are not misled by them at all. Indeed the very foundation of that whole way of arguing,
which

which confident persons use on this subject, is wrong: and we need not embarrass ourselves about the particulars of it so much as we do. They have suggested, that if heaven vouchsafed a revelation to mankind, it must certainly be the most beautiful composition, in the clearest language and the most regular method possible; every thing must be fully explained in it, nothing capable of being contradicted or doubted; and every part of the world must be put in possession of it. Now we find that this is not true of the Old and New Testament, and therefore some are inclined to question, whether indeed they are gifts of God, or, however, gifts of any extraordinary value. But the same persons might just as well have suggested, that all the knowledge he gives us by natural means also must be easily acquired, perfect and universal: which we experience it not to be. God hath provided remedies for the diseases of our bodies: the greatest blessing we have, next to those for the wants of our souls. But * many of them were unknown to mankind till very lately, are known but to few now, perhaps very many, that will be known, are not discovered yet. Multitudes have believed in medicines and methods of no use at all: several of the best have been despised, rejected, ridiculed; fierce and long disputes have arisen about the nature and benefit of others; and perhaps, after much pains taken, much uncertainty still remains: the most efficacious and approved are often disagreeable and disgusting; unskilfully or dishonestly applied, they have often very bad effects, and oftener yet produce their good ones but slowly and imperfectly. Yet we cannot, and we do not doubt, but there are such things as real remedies, which a kind Providence, deserving our sincerest thanks, hath bestowed on us. And why then should we hesitate about the divine original, or sovereign usefulness, of the holy scriptures, merely because they are attended with some disadvantages of the same sort? Indeed whatever way of reasoning would prove, that our Maker is obliged to relieve either our temporal or spiritual disorders in the manner we could wish, will prove equally that he is obliged to prevent both: the contrary of which we daily feel. Therefore suppose the bible had such imperfections in it, as it hath not, no more would follow, than that God had extended

* See Bishop Butler's analogy, p. 265, 266.

tended his direction and assistance to the writers of it only to a certain degree : we could never conclude, that he had not directed and assisted them, as far as the purposes of religion required. It may be said he could have guarded it against all possible misconstructions and objections : but perhaps not without making man a different creature from what he is ; for weak men will stumble, and wicked men cavil, at every thing : or not without making scripture so different from what it is, that on the whole it would have answered the several ends, for which it was designed, less than it doth. It may be said farther, that at least he could easily have guarded it against many of the objections which have been made. But perhaps he foresaw, that if he had, others would have been made in their stead : or he thought fit to exercise the industry of some persons, and try the uprightness of others. In short, we must suffer the all-wise God, both to govern his world, and to reveal his will, in his own way.

But a careful and judicious inspection will shew in his word, as it doth in his works, not only that beauty and use abound much more than was conceived at first view ; but that many imagined deformities are real excellencies ; and many seemingly worthless or inconvenient things, necessary or beneficial : whereas the finest pieces of human art seldom fail of sinking in their character upon accurate examination and frequent review. There are passages in scripture so lofty, that most eyes are unable, without help, to see their meaning distinctly. And why should there not be things above common reach, to excite and reward the attempts of the able and diligent ; to prevent their being fatiated with plain doctrines alone, till they grow weary of them ; and to give them the pleasure of communicating, and others of receiving from them, the discoveries they make : just as, in worldly affairs, God hath appointed, that some shall be rich and charitable, others poor and thankful ; and thus hath provided in the best and wisest manner for all ? There are again passages of such great simplicity and plainness, that they appear to some low and flat. But then, not only different subjects, and manners of treating them, require very different styles ; but all nations and ages have their peculiar forms of expression, their circumlocutions and repetitions, which, however mean or tedious they may seem to others, yet seem to them graceful and proper : and such as endeavour to teach and influence

influence them (as the sacred writers did the *Jews* and first Christian converts,) do well to comply with established usage in these things, even though they could mend it. For this reason the authors of the New Testament, had they been masters of the most elegant *Greek*, would have acted wisely in preferring to it that vulgar kind, which the persons, to whom they wrote, ordinarily used, and understood better *. Besides, artless and unadorned narrations and exhortations are best suited to common capacities; and carry in them some evidence, that they are not contrived to amuse and deceive: for in that case they would have been more laboured and ornamented. We have no cause therefore, from the roughness and uncouth prolixity of some parts, to think scripture ill calculated for the profit of its readers; amongst whom its first readers were first to be regarded: but we have much cause from the dignity, the persuasiveness, the energy of other parts, to conclude *it is the power of God unto salvation* †: for else, *whence had these men all these things* ‡? We have no cause in the least to blame it for what we do not comprehend; but abundant cause to admire it for what we do; and to argue, like *Socrates*, on reading the works of *Heraclitus*: “So much as I understand is excellent, “and therefore I believe the rest is so too.” We want to have the bible, each according to his natural disposition, or acquired way of thinking, every where sublime, or easy, or elegant, or methodical, or copious, or concise. But God hath most wisely made it *all things to all men* §: hath furnished it with the clearest and most mysterious, the loftiest and most familiar, the closest and most diffuse, the best connected and the abruptest passages, all perfectly suited to his gracious purposes: and it is monstrous perverseness in us, to make each his own capacity the measure of the whole; reckon every thing, that happens to rise above us, unintelligible; every thing, that condescends to those beneath us, contemptible; and so on.

But

* See Mosheim's *Cogitationes de Interpretatione SS. litterarum*, p. 176. where he defends the unpolite style of scripture, as most intelligible to the generality, and supports his defence by the authority of Orig. contra Cels. l. vi. And Sext. Emp. lib. i. adv. mathematicos seu lib. i. c. 10. adv. grammaticos, § 234. p. 265. Ed. Fabr.

† Rom. i. 16.

‡ Matt. xiii 56.

§ 1 Cor. ix. 22.

But then farther, we ought to consider, that the latest books of the bible are near 1700 years old, the earliest many ages older still: both parts of it written in languages, that have long been out of common use; and the first in one, of which we have no other remains approaching towards its antiquity; and which therefore, were it ever so accurate and beautiful originally, is incapable of being perfectly understood at present. Now these things, and, what must accompany them, a great diversity of customs, and modes of speaking, from ours, without defeating, or obstructing, the general design of scripture, must of necessity obscure the beauty, and even the meaning, of particular places; and prevent in some measure its appearing to us what it is in itself. The same is the case of the ancient fine writers among the heathens. Yet none of them was ever despised on that account by men of judgment: but they are studied and illustrated, and their latent excellencies pointed out with the greater care; and perhaps the more admired, for being less obvious: and large allowances are made for those perfections, which must have been formerly visible, but are no longer so. Now surely we ought to judge of scripture with equal fairness and regard.

Besides, as all ancient books in the world have suffered more or less by the negligence of transcribers, and the injuries of time, yet without the loss, or any considerable diminution, of their usefulness by it; so may the bible. It is much better guarded against wilful corruptions, and even casual mistakes, in material points, than any other old record, by the vast multitude of copies, taken early, dispersed every where, read in public, weighed in private, quoted in sermons, conversations, books, and remaining in the hands of all different sects of Christians, who would of course watch one another to prevent any attempts of making alterations. Accordingly we find, and have great cause to adore Providence for it, that neither during the long reign of Popery hath any text been changed, whatever may have been tried, to favour their tenets; nor do the various readings of the manuscripts or translations of any church upon earth, affect any single fundamental of faith or practice. But still even small errors in copying may have rendered passages of less moment, (for in these they would be likelier to escape observation) defective, harsh, contrary to grammar, inexplicable; may have broken connections, that once were

plain ; raised seeming inconsistencies, where at first there were none ; but particularly may have altered names, and increased or lessened numbers, which in all books are very apt to suffer by transcribing. And the various disadvantages, under which any parts of scripture may be justly supposed to lie, from such accidents as these, must in all equity be charged, not on itself, but on the blameable carelessness of mankind. God was not obliged to work miracles to prevent them : but we are obliged to honour duly whatever comes from him, though we cannot enjoy it in its original perfection. Length of time hath not diminished at all in any thing essential, nor very considerably in any thing else, the usefulness of the sacred writings : which, I hope, hath now been satisfactorily proved and vindicated.

But the text asserts them, not only to be useful, but completely useful : *that, by their means, the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works* : the minister of the gospel fully provided with what he is to preach, the believer with what he is to learn. I cannot enlarge on this point, and surely I need not : for the proof is short, and the objections easily obviated without naming them. If the scriptures are inspired, what they say of themselves is true ; and they say they are sufficient to salvation, plainly in the text and elsewhere, and imply it throughout. The Old Testament was sufficient in its time : how can we doubt but the New is now ? How can we imagine, that in a volume of such bulk, written by different persons, all under the direction of God, professedly for instructing mankind in religion, and containing so many discourses of Christ and his apostles for that purpose, any thing necessary is omitted ? Besides, we can know no more of Christianity with certainty by any other way, than we know by this. Oral instruction would answer the end very well for a time, and did so : and therefore St. Paul very properly directs the *Thessalonians* to hold the traditions, which they had been taught, whether by word, or by his epistle *. But things, delivered by word of mouth only, are soon lost or changed ; and false and mischievous traditions rise up instead of the true, as the *Jewish* church had then experienced : and therefore the Christian covenant was put in writing by the first publishers of it, as the preceding was by *Moses*. The Christian writers, who

* 2 Thess. ii. 15.

who succeeded the apostles, were confessedly fallible, and consequently unworthy of equal regard with them: nor did they attempt to make any additions to the rule of faith and manners, comprehended in the bible. On the contrary, they held, as we do, that all essential articles are to be found there: and so did the following ages too: till at length the rulers of the church of *Rome*, having set up notions and practices, which the scripture did not warrant, were obliged to pretend, (but very falsely) that they were taught by the ancient fathers, or delivered down by memory. And they decreed in the council of *Trent*, 200 years ago, that such traditions were to be received with the same respect as holy writ. But let us rest on surer ground: *build on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone* *; and on all occasions appeal to the law and to the testimony: for if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them †.

* Eph. ii. 20.

† 1c. viii. 20.

S E R M O N XLI.

ON THE DUTY OF READING THE SCRIPTURE.

2 TIM. iii. 16, 17.

All scripture is given by inspiration of God: and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

IN discoursing on these words, I have already proved,

I. That scripture is of divine authority:

II. That it completely answers every purpose of religion.

And therefore I now proceed to the next head, proposed in the beginning. which is

III. That we ought to read and study it diligently.

This duty follows with the clearest evidence, from its inspiration and usefulness. For if we may neglect what was written under so peculiar a direction of God, for our guidance to eternal happiness, to what can we possibly ever be bound to attend? And yet I fear the consciences of many, if not most of us, can too easily inform us, how little we regard, how seldom we look into, these books. We exclaim against it perhaps as the wickedest tyranny in the church of *Rome*, that it prohibits them to be read without licence. But do we ourselves make much more use of our bibles, in the midst of the fullest liberty, than if they continued to be locked up from us? Do we not spend a very small share of our time, of our leisure time, in looking into them, compared with what is wasted in the idlest occupations and amusements? The hours which we
allot

allot to reading, do we not more commonly, and with far more pleasure, employ them on any other sort of reading, the most insignificant, the most corrupting and pernicious, than on this? Are there not multitudes, who can hardly name the time, when, even on the Lord's day itself, they read a chapter, with the serious intention of improving their souls? Nay, the few, (and very few I doubt they are at present) who think of religion in earnest, do they not usually apply to other books chiefly for instruction in it, and study the sacred volumes far less than the compositions of fallible men?

These are facts as notorious as they are lamentable. And therefore I shall

1. Consider, in order to remove the causes, from which so wonderful a contempt of God's word hath arisen.

2. Produce his commands for paying it a very different regard.

3. Shew what evils follow from disobeying these commands.

1. I shall consider the causes, from which this wonderful contempt of God's word hath arisen.

Now the more general causes doubtless are, the original corruption of our nature, indisposing us to every thing good; (against which, if we value our interests in a future life, we ought to watch continually :) and our consequent acts and habits of sin, which we very absurdly suffer to drive us from the scripture, that we may be easy in them, instead of having recourse to the scripture, which would excite us to an effectual reformation of them. Another very extensive cause is the wrong education of our youth. They are very little taught, in comparison of what they should, (if they are taught at all) either by their parents at home, or their masters or tutors afterwards, to be reverently conversant in the sacred writings, and yet less instructed how to profit by them. Hence they are unacquainted with their history, their doctrines, their language: have no early impressions made on them in favour of what they contained: and so, when they are grown up, ignorantly slight them, sin without any restraint from them, and are easily induced to join with scoffers in ridiculing them. All this might be much otherwise, if they, who educate children, were but near so careful about it, as true piety, or even common prudence, would lead them to be.

Other

Other causes, or excuses, for neglecting to read scripture are, the various objections made against it, many of which you have heard confuted; and the disagreeableness arising from the peculiarity of its style, of which also I have spoken. But such as can read it only in a translation, (and the rest are a very small number in proportion,) will be tempted to complain of it still more than others: whereas they ought to acknowledge, that they are less qualified to judge, and therefore less intitled to find fault. For all translations, especially from writings of distant countries and ages, lose a great deal of the spirit, the strength, the elegance, and often the clearness too, of the original. Besides, ours is a literal translation. Even the most figurative and poetical passages, and the remotest from our whole common manner of expression, are almost always rendered word for word, without aiming at beauty, but merely at faithfulness. It is incredible, to any but men of skill in these matters, how great a disadvantage this must be. Scarce any other ancient book could appear tolerable in such a dress, but the bible: and that suffers by it extremely. Yet if this method had not been chosen, if any fine passages had been brought into a fairer light, any harsh ones softened, any dark ones explained, any turn of a sentence made more forcible or more pleasing, by taking only such freedoms, in a moderate degree, as are taken, to a very great one, in most or all other authors, that we translate; the same persons who complain of flatness or obscurity now, would have complained of artifice and unfairness then. And surely the scrupulous fidelity, which hath been shewn on this occasion, well deserves in return the candor of making all due allowances. Amongst these, a very great one is to be made on the following account, that even this translation was published above 150 years ago; when multitudes of texts were not near so well understood, and consequently could not be so rightly expressed, as they have been since: when also our language was different, in several particulars, from what it is at present; and therefore, though it hath been happily secured, by the common use of our bible and prayer-book, from changing so fast as it did before, yet some phrases in both are become less intelligible, and a great many less proper and graceful, than they once were: not to say, that the utmost propriety and accuracy was not in those days very strictly regarded. Besides, every book of the bible hath, for the convenience

venience of quotation, been divided, many ages after it was written, into chapters, not always quite so judiciously separated, as they might have been; and these chapters again into very short verses, which persons are too apt to consider as independent sentences; and thus often mistake the meaning, but oftener still overlook the otherwise plain connexion and force of argument in the sacred writings: perhaps imagine that there is none, and that studying them is to little purpose. Nay, lastly, the very expositors of scripture, whose profession is to assist men in reading it, and whose utility for that purpose, upon the whole, is very considerable, yet sometimes discourage them from it. For commentators, in all books on which they labour much, and therefore above all in the bible, on which they have laboured most, frequently perplex what without them would be clear enough; either from partiality to their own notions, or vanity of finding out something new, or desire of seeming to differ from others where they do not, that they may not seem to copy them when they do.

All these things contribute to lessen the esteem of the bible with some, perhaps more than is imagined: for though they may seldom be proposed as direct formal arguments against its usefulness, yet they are secretly and artfully thrown into the scale, so as to weigh a great deal on that side of the question. And many, who will not allow, or, it may be, do not perceive, that they think the worse of scripture for them, yet are kept by them, more or less, from the serious reading of it. But evidently both sorts of persons act very unreasonably. For the original is not in the least answerable for the defects of translations, or for any other human imprudences. And though it cannot, by the best translation, appear in all its primitive splendor; yet in the worst (and ours is far from being such,) it exhibits every thing necessary to the obtaining of eternal life, which alone might sufficiently recommend it to our most reverent respect and diligent meditation. However, besides this, under its greatest disadvantages, if we attend to it judiciously, we shall find in it, (as critics, by no means prejudiced in its favour, have confessed) far nobler and more striking beauties, and in far greater plenty, than in any or all the writers of heathen antiquity.

But the internal hindrances, (if I may call them so) of studying scripture, have not been the only, or perhaps the chief ones.

ones. Others of strong influence have proceeded from outward and accidental circumstances. When restoring the knowledge of it had overthrown the dominion of Popery over this and several neighbouring countries, (an event, which ought to make it for ever dear to us,) the spirit of controversy, once raised on that subject, was unnecessarily extended to so many others, that the word of God came to be considered by too many in scarce any other light than as furnishing materials for disputes: and so the following generations began to grow weary of them and it together. Another misfortune was, that frequently men, not the best qualified for interpreting even the plainer parts of it, blinded with new light, undertook without fear the most difficult; and fathered upon the bible whatever absurdities had started up in their own imaginations. Besides, not a few in the last century, from an affectation of uncommon esteem for it, introduced its peculiar phrases on occasions of so little dignity, grafted so freely still more peculiar ones upon them, and used both so improperly and unseasonably, that others, from disgust of their language, contracted no small dislike to that of scripture itself. Nay, I fear, that the sacred writings have not had sufficient justice done them even in the pulpit. We are apter to dwell on general subjects, than to explain particular passages: and afraid to break the force of a reasoning or an exhortation by intermixing with it the exposition of a text. In some degree this may be right: but I doubt we carry it too far, especially as we have no separate expounding of scripture, which discreetly conducted would be unspeakably useful. And thus the people have been left sadly ignorant of a great part of their bibles. Now these things, coinciding in our days with a higher degree, than ever the world knew before, of that self-opinion, which despises the doctrines of revelation as irrational, and that rage for self-indulgence of every kind, which renders its precepts and threatenings insupportable, have produced an absolute scorn of it in great numbers, and a strange indifference towards it in almost all. So that now mere custom and fashion is thought sufficient to justify, and even require, if we are well bred, a total and avowed neglect of this important book; without spending a moment on the disagreeable examination, what pleas it hath to urge for being studied as the law of our lives.

Yet

Yet visibly these inducements for disregarding it, are, if possible, more groundless than the foregoing. Some have made wrong and absurd uses of it. Why should that hinder us from making the right and wise one? Some are conceited, or vicious, or fond of applause from the weakest of their fellow creatures. Why should not we, notwithstanding that, be humble and virtuous, and seek the approbation of our Creator? Let us therefore determine, that neither bad reasons nor bad examples shall ever move us to slight the holy scriptures: and carefully divesting ourselves of the prejudices too commonly arising from them, let us proceed,

2. To hear the divine commands for reading and honouring it.

Every manifestation of God's will implies in its very nature a command to hearken to it with our deepest attention: and his words could be written down for no other end, than that all persons concerned might peruse them frequently, and bear them always in mind. But that none may pretend ignorance of his purpose, he hath declared it expressly. *Moses* charges the *Israelites*: *Behold I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the Lord my God commanded me: take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget them, and they depart from thy heart: but teach them thy sons and thy sons sons, that they may learn to fear him all the days that they shall live upon the earth, and that they may teach their children* *. God himself charges them: *Lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul, and teach them your children, that your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children* †. He charges *Joshua* in particular: *This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth, but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then shalt thou make thy way prosperous, and then shalt thou have good success* ‡. The first Psalm saith the very same thing of every pious man: *His delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law will he exercise himself day and night: and whatsoever he doth, it shall prosper* §. Nor are we to study the precepts only, but the rest. *Isaiab*, speaking of the completion of a prophecy, directs the people: *Seek ye out of the book of the Lord and read* §. When the rich man in the

VOL. I.

3 P

parable

* Deut. iv. 5, 9, 10.

† Deut. xi. 18, 19, 21.

‡ Josh. i. 8.

§ Psal. i. 2, 4.

§ Isa. xxxiv. 16.

parable was desirous to prevent his brethren from coming into the same place of torment with himself, *Abraham* said unto him, *They have Moses and the prophets : let them bear them* *. When the Jews were venting their prejudices against our Saviour, he exhorts them : *Search the scriptures : for in them ye think, meaning, and rightly think, ye have eternal life ; and they are they which testify of me* †. St. Paul tells the Romans, that *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning* ‡. Now we cannot question surely, but the New Testament deserves equal attention with the Old. The proof, which you have had, of its inspiration, proves that at the same time. The gospels, *written that men might believe, and believing have life* ¶, must be read to produce that effect. Of the epistles we may judge, by the care which St. Paul took to have his communicated and spread. He inscribes his first to the *Corinthians*, not to them only, but to *all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord* §. He requires the *Colossians*, when that which he addressed to them is read amongst them, to cause that it be read also in the church of the *Laodiceans* ||. He charges the *Thessalonians* by the Lord, in the first epistle, which they had from him, that it be read unto *all the holy brethren* **. Doubtless the other churches too understood his mind in this matter. And St. John, in the beginning of the *Revelation*, a book that seems the least fitted of any for common use, takes care to say, *Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear, the words of this prophecy* ††.

These excellent men could not mean, that only the Christians of that generation were bound to read their writings. They knew the following ones would have the same and greater need, in proportion to their distance. The following ones, for three centuries and more, knew it themselves ; employed their thoughts on the sacred books principally, carried them about in their bosoms, gave up their lives rather than part with them : and such as through fear delivered them to their persecutors to be destroyed, were censured by the authority of the church ; and branded, in the common speech of the faithful, by the infamous name of *Traditores*, from which the word traitor is derived into our tongue.

In

* Luke xvi. 29. † John v. 39. ‡ Rom. xv. 4. ¶ John xx. 31.

§ 1 Cor. i. 2. || Col. iv. 16. ** 1 Thess. v. 27. †† Rev. i. 3.

In vain are we told then, that the scriptures contain passages *hard to be understood*, and therefore are not fit for vulgar inspection. St. Peter, who said they did *, made no such inference. The primitive Christians, who experienced it as well as we, never thought nor heard of any such. In our Saviour's conversation with his apostles there were things, extremely hard to be understood: ought they then to have been debarred from it? Let us not aim to be wiser than God. He hath given us his word, not for a snare, but for a light and a guide. Every blessing which we have, indeed, puts us to some trial: and this tries our fairness of mind, our diligence in collecting the articles of our faith and practice, our gratitude for what he bestows, our submission to his good pleasure in what he withholds from us. But he that hath engaged us in this work, if we use our faithful endeavours humbly, will not fail to support us under the difficulties of it; and the going through it as we ought will be suitably rewarded. Were the pretended dangers therefore, in the study of scripture, much greater than they are, yet this is the method, which God hath appointed for our spiritual improvement; and which having appointed, he will render effectual. Let us trust him therefore to instruct us in his own way. By the reading and preaching of his word, however unpromising the means might seem, he raised up his church at first, notwithstanding all the violence of Jews and Heathens: and by the same he will uphold it for ever, against all the scoffs and cavils of Infidels. *For the foolishness of God is wiser than men: and the weakness of God is stronger than men* †. Our only concern is to perform the duty, which he hath commanded: and we shall certainly receive the benefits, which he hath promised, each in the manner and degree, that his case requires.

But as you have already seen the profitableness of scripture to every purpose of religion, you have seen by consequence the advantages of being conversant in it: and therefore I shall now go on to invert the prospect, by shewing you, as I proposed,

3. The evils, which follow from disregarding the injunctions of God in relation to it.

Were

* 2 Pet. iii. 16.

† 1 Cor. i. 25.

Were those injunctions in themselves of no great moment, yet they come from the Almighty : and refusing to take notice of them is losing the recompence of so much obedience, and incurring the penalty of so much disobedience. But they are indeed of moment unspeakable, in several respects. The sacred writings are the source of our religious knowledge : and without an acquaintance with them, we shall be liable to ignorance, uncertainty and mistake, even in points of the greatest importance. Thence arose the false doctrine of the *Sadducees*, to whom our Saviour says, *Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures* *. Nor is the danger less in respect of practice. Neglect of holy writ must introduce a neglect of its Author, on more accounts than one. How shall persons keep themselves easy in not looking into a book, which their Maker hath appointed to be written for their use, and required them to use continually, but by thinking as little and as lowly of him as they can? Therefore they will be strongly tempted to every thing, that may assist them in such impiety : and will soon, alas, find themselves able to make large advances in that high road to ruin here and hereafter. Again, scripture places before men, in every page, the most affecting proofs and descriptions of the holiness and justice, the wisdom and power, the goodness and mercy, the continual presence and never ceasing agency of Him, who is the Creator, the Benefactor, the King and Judge of all. It makes known to us the inexpressible condescension and love of our Redeemer, the perfect reasonableness and purity of his law, the need and means of obtaining the sanctifying influences of the blessed Spirit, the infinite importance of preparing for our unchangeable state. If then, for want of attending to scripture, the impressions of these objects wear out of our minds, as they must ; all the seriousness, which they are fitted to produce, will wear out of them at the same time ; spiritual and eternal things will be less and less in our thoughts, (consult your own hearts, I intreat you, whether you do not find it so) till at last we shall come to live and act as *without God in the world* †. Particularly, what we are bound to do and abstain from is laid down in the bible much too clearly to be misunderstood or evaded. But if once we leave off looking
for

* Matth. xxii. 29.

† Eph. ii. 12.

for our duty there, we shall soon mould it within our own minds into what shape and size we please, till we bring it in effect to nothing. For even supposing, that we begin our neglect with no such intention at all, yet bad inclinations will creep in upon us, one after another; and not meeting with the proper check, will increase and multiply, we cannot easily suspect beforehand to what degree.

It will be said perhaps, that reading other good books, which are shorter and clearer, may supply the omission of reading scripture, possibly on the whole to advantage. But they, who once grow weary of the latter, seldom, I believe, continue long to make any considerable use of the former: and therefore this plea, for the most part, is only a pretence. Or were it sincere, as unquestionably it sometimes is, other books have not, and cannot have, the authority in what they affirm, in what they require, in what they promise and threaten, that the word of God hath: *the word*, which our Saviour hath declared *shall judge us in the last day* *. Joined with this, and confirmed by it, the compositions of men are of great efficacy: but when they are separated from it, the case is unspeakably altered. We shall be apt to pay as little regard, as we think fit, to mere human writers: and overlook, or call in question, whatever we do not like. Yet sometimes again we shall be in danger of paying them too much regard, and so being led by them into false notions, which may give us uneasiness without need, or comfort without ground; or into superstitious practices, which may discredit our holy profession. What followed in the middle ages of Christianity when men left off and were discouraged from reading the word of truth, but that they were *turned unto fables* †? Lying legends were believed: Pictures and images were first gazed at for instruction, then worshipped. They *forsook the fountain of living waters, and bowed them out broken cisterns, that held no water* ‡, but draughts of poison; whereas what we learn in scripture, we learn from the spring-head; and not only every thing it teaches is right, but its very silence is instructive. For if any thing is not made there, a necessary part of our faith or practice, no power on earth hath a right to make it so: and had but believers invariably kept to
this

* John xii. 48.

† 2 Tim. iv. 4.

‡ Jer. ii. 13.

this book, as their rule ; all the corruptions of Christianity, and all the wickedness of every kind, produced by those corruptions, had been happily prevented. Besides, were we to embrace every thing right, and nothing wrong, that we find in other pious treatises ; yet there is a peculiar energy in holy writ, which is not in them. Its denunciations are more awful, its convictions stronger, its consolations more authentic, its warnings more alarming, its expostulations more penetrating. The bare reflection, who it is that speaks, cannot fail to make them so in a very considerable degree : and he hath added a supernatural force to them over and above. *Is not my word like as a fire, saith the Lord, and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces* * ? *The word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart* †. Whence accordingly the efficacious and converting preacher, is he not who comes with inticing words of man's wisdom ‡, but who, like Apollos, is mighty in the scriptures ¶. *He that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully ; what is the chaff to the wheat ? saith the Lord* §.

But farther : By omitting to read and consider the original charter of our religion, from which our whole knowledge of it is derived, persons will be unacquainted with the language of religion. And hence they will first blindly stumble and cavil at the phrases of scripture, not knowing them to be such : and afterwards learn to despise them, though they do know it. The offices of the liturgy, especially the occasional ones, that recur seldomer, will seem strange and unaccountable to them. They will repeat the psalms in the congregation absolutely without meaning ; neither saying in their own persons, or applying to their own use, the things that suit them ; nor thinking at all, to what sort of persons, or good purposes, the rest relates. They will hardly ever pay attention to the lessons, epistles and gospels, but look upon them as pauses and breaks in the service, to be filled up as they please ; or if they do hearken to them, yet not understanding many parts of them, will receive
little

* Jer. xxiii. 29.

† Heb. iv. 12.

‡ 1 Cor. ii. 4.

§ Acts xviii. 24.

§ Jer. xxiii. 28.

little benefit from them; and possibly misunderstanding some, will receive harm: entertaining injurious opinions of the sacred oracles from what they hear out of them, in this imperfect manner, instead of the honourable and useful sentiments, which would have been revived in their breasts, had they applied themselves beforehand to an orderly perusal of them with proper care. Then as to sermons, on which commonly the chief reliance for instruction is, they, who are not sufficiently versed in the bible at home, will be unable to judge of the proofs we bring from it here, or the general conformity of our preaching to it. And elsewhere they will be misled by the sound of scriptural words, used in a sense which the writers never intended; and so be like *children tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive* *. Now it is not our desire to impose on your ignorance, but to appeal to your knowledge. We wish, we beseech you, to imitate the *Bereans*, commended so justly in the *Acts of the Apostles*, as *more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so*. It follows, *Therefore many of them believed* †; effectually no doubt.

Another very important use of searching the scripture is, that in the midst of that deluge of evil communication, which overflows this wicked land, to a degree that no country, calling itself Christian, ever experienced before, few persons can avoid hearing, more or less, unfair and even ludicrous representations made of one part or other of God's word; which may be too likely to pass upon them for just ones, unless they are previously so well skilled in it, as either to know in particular the true vindication of the passages abused, or at least to know in general, that it cannot be liable to the imputations, which profane people would cast upon it, because the spirit of the whole is inconsistent with their suggestions. If indeed they themselves would but take the trouble of understanding what they take the liberty of burlesquing, it would save them the guilt of many a blasphemous reflection, and the shame of many a silly jest. But at least persons of better dispositions will surely

be

* Eph. iv. 14.

† Acts. xvii. 11, 12.

be persuaded to so rational a method of guarding against the infection of their pernicious irreverence. Possibly some will reply, that irreligious thoughts and temptations to unbelief may arise from what occurs to us in reading the bible ourselves, as well as from what others occasionally say of it. But certainly the danger is far less: and the greatest part of that may be prevented by observing such rules for the safe and useful performance of this duty, as persons, one should imagine, would of course lay down for themselves, or at least will see to be reasonable, when proposed to them; as, God willing, they shall be to you the very next opportunity. And if still any difficulty and trial remain, yet coming in our way, when our minds are in a serious and considerate state, disposed to examine impartially and reverently, as in the presence of God, and to beg, that his *Spirit* would *guide us into all truth**; there will be no doubt of obtaining, on due inquiry, competent satisfaction.

I shall only say this farther, to shew the evil of neglecting the sacred writings, that they are what makes us to differ from *the Gentiles, which know not God*†, for even our natural religion is borrowed from them; and they can be useful only by being read: that when the church of *Rome* had almost suppressed them, Christianity was buried under falsehood, superstition and wickedness; and when they were restored to common use, true piety, virtue and liberty, were restored by their means: that those nations and those persons, who attend to them with the highest respect, are the most sincerely, the most steadily good: and that in proportion as we of this nation have disregarded them, we have grown unsettled in our faith even of what reason teaches, profligate in our behaviour, unmindful of public or private real welfare, and visibly ripe for speedy destruction.

Let us all therefore instantly return to the right way, before it is too late. The poorest of us, if he hath not a bible, may have one, either by purchase, for he lays out much more in a few weeks on matters of far less necessity, or by the charitable gift of some pious benefactor. And the busiest of us may and must find time for every branch of the *one thing needful*.

* John xvi. 13.

† 1 Thess. iv. 5.

ful *. Every person hath at least several hours of the Lord's day, and some little share of others, for the exercises of religion: But many of us have much more leisure; not all of it perhaps innocently, and a great deal of it not prudently employed. Spending a due part of it on the divine law would both dispose and enable us to spend the rest, whether devoted to worldly affairs or to relaxations, with truer cheerfulness now, and to a better account at the great day. We have most of us at times heavy sufferings: and poor supports are any others, that we can use under them, compared with theirs, who *by patience and comfort of the scriptures have hope* †. The most cautious of us have frequently violent assaults from our spiritual enemy: and we cannot arm ourselves against him more effectually, than, as our Lord himself did, with *the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God* ‡. The strongest of us have sad remains of weakness, the discreetest of injudiciousness: and the surest remedy for both is that of the son of Sirach: *Let thy mind be upon the ordinances of the Lord, and meditate continually in his commandments: He shall establish thine heart, and give thee wisdom at thine own desire* §.

* Luke x. 42. † Rom. xv. 4. ‡ Eph. vi. 17. § Ecclus. vi. 37.

S E R M O N XLII.

DIRECTIONS FOR READING THE SCRIPTURE PROFITABLY.

2 TIM. iii. 16, 17.

All scripture is given by inspiration of God: and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

I HAVE shewn you, in several discourses on this text, the divine authority of scripture, its complete usefulness to all the purposes of religion, and the consequent duty of reading it. Yet still I am sensible an unhappy objection may remain with too many, that they have tried, and do not experience this usefulness; and why it should be their duty to persist in reading what they do not find attended with any good effects, they cannot apprehend. But if they have not read as they ought, their whole argument falls to the ground. Nothing is to be expected from the wrong performance of any duty: and therefore I proposed originally,

IV. To give directions for the right performance of this.

Many proper ones, I hope, have been intimated to you not obscurely, under the former heads: Part of which however I shall now repeat amongst others. For to say again *the same things, to me is not grievous, and for you it is safe* *.

That we should come to the word of God with serious minds, is a requisite, that one should hardly have thought needful to mention, if there were not some, who give little o-
ther

* Phil. iii. 1.

ther proof of ever having looked into it, than perverting the expressions of it to ludicrous purposes, and so extracting poison from the bread of life. You need not be told, that such can receive no improvement from it: but only be warned against suffering them to infect you with the same distemper: for to men of a gay and lively turn it is often very catching. But reflect: Every book in the world, of every sort, may easily be turned into matter of diversion, if people are resolved to shew at any rate, some their ability, and others, (which is far the more usual case) their desire only, of being witty. But especially on sacred subjects, the corruptness of mens hearts disposes them both to invent and receive such kind of entertainment with peculiar eagerness: for this very reason principally, that they know they ought not. And besides, the Old and New Testament do lie somewhat opener to profane abuse, than many other pious compositions, from the difference of stile and manners in distant ages and countries, from the scrupulous exactness of our translation, and the changes in our language, that have happened since it was made. But surely there are strong motives, of religion, of prudence, of common decency, to restrain men, from taking such unfair advantages, to so bad an end; if this contemptible affectation of appearing ingenious, by forcing a laugh out of every thing, did not so effectually destroy, as it doth, all regard to rightness of behaviour and true good sense. *A scorner seeketh wisdom, and findeth it not: but knowledge is easy to him, that considereth* *.

Let us therefore never permit ourselves to make, either in thought, at the time of reading the scripture, or in discourse afterwards, a light and burlesque application of any text: for how little harm soever we may intend, the practice is plainly unfit and irreverent: besides that we are soon led on from small freedoms to greater. And let us never be influenced to think ill or meanly of the least part of God's word from any such applications made by others: for they prove nothing against scripture, but much against those who invent or use them. Or if we find, that, notwithstanding, they do in fact begin to make impressions upon us, as they may imperceptibly, if we are not on the watch; let us avoid as carefully, yet as inoffensively, as we can, the company of those, who delight in such danger-

* Prov. xiv. 6. It is wrongly translated, *understandeth*.

ous conversation: according to *Solomon's* excellent rule, *Cease, my son, to hear the instruction, that causeth to err from the words of knowledge* *. For as to any hope of good from arguing with them, no people upon earth are so incapable of being convinced or silenced by reason, as they that are conceited of a libertine wit. And therefore, however entertaining their talk may be otherwise, yet being essentially faulty in this respect, let us consider it only in the strong, but just light, in which *St. Paul* places the idle discourse of some in his own days, when he saith, *But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness; and their word will eat, as doth a canker* †. They, whose learning and judgment and taste and worth are the most universally acknowledged, have, in all times down to our own, spoken and thought of the bible with the highest degree of honourable regard. And it is no less absurd than impious, to be hurried into despising and ridiculing it, either by the extravagant flights of any man's wild fancy, or the graver authority of judges so evidently prejudiced, as the self-sufficient, or the dissolute, merely because they are grown of late more numerous and less modest. Let us at least observe a little first, what good effects this new kind of wisdom produces in the lives and families of those, who are so fond of it; and wait a while to see, (if indeed it be not too visible already,) what sort of figure they themselves, and a nation composed of them, or led by them, make and are likely to make in the eyes of the present and future ages.

With due seriousness we are to join due reverence in reading scripture: and *receive it, not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God* ‡; and therefore credible. The revelation, which he hath given us, cannot indeed contradict the reason which he hath given us: and therefore we must never construe it irrationally. But it may easily contradict our fanciful notions and favourite conjectures: in which case we are to *cast down imaginations and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ* §.

Nor is it less our duty to subject all our vicious inclinations to the authority of holy writ, than our vain prejudices. For

if

* Prov. xix. 27.

† 1 Thess. ii. 13.

‡ 2 Tim. ii. 16, 17.

§ 2 Cor. x. 5.

if we indulge but one, it will naturally bias us to reject, or misinterpret, whatever is inconsistent with it: and besides, we shall lose the hope of that illumination, without which we can apprehend nothing to good purpose. Whence the angel saith to *Daniel*, *None of the wicked shall understand; but the wise shall understand* *. And our Saviour promises only †, that *If any man will do the will of God, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God.*

But with whatever good dispositions we may read the scripture, unless we read it also attentively, we shall fail of our end. If we perform it only as a task, we shall find it a wearisome one. If we consider spending so much time in it, without care to improve by it, as a work acceptable to God on its own account: this is cheating ourselves with a false and superstitious notion of piety, and much more so, if we imagine, that employing one part of the day thus will in the least atone for doing, in any other part, what we are forbidden.

Now attentive reading will present to our view a variety of things, that will affect us very differently. And the benefit or the harm we shall receive from them, (for we may receive either,) will greatly depend on the conduct which we observe amidst them. If we have never been used to read the bible, or have long disused it, some passages in it will probably seem very strange to us at first: as undoubtedly the whole frame of nature, and the whole tenor of Providence would seem, were we let into our present knowledge of it all at once, instead of being made acquainted with it by slow degrees. They therefore, who come with a disposition to object and cavil, may have abundant room to exercise it. They, who insist on being satisfied in all particulars, will be greatly disappointed in many. For every one must not hope to discover whatever may be discovered. Or if he could, most of our inquiries into the scheme of religion, revealed or natural, as well as into the constitution of the material world, if pursued to the utmost, will at length terminate in something which we do not and cannot know. So that men must prepare themselves for what they will be sure to meet with; must expect to find some dark, and some hard sayings. On these they must never put a bad sense; but are neither to be offended at all, nor wonder much, if some-
times

* Dan. xii. 10.

† John vii. 17.

times they are at a loss how to put any : but believe implicitly, (for this is faith in God, not man,) that there is some, worthy of the rest : and not think of forsaking their guide to heaven, merely because they perceive not the design or propriety of every sentence that he speaks to them on the road. In short, they must reason and resolve, if need be, like the holy apostles in the sixth of St. *John* : who were doubtless perplexed, and staggered not a little at our Saviour's discourse, recorded there : but when *many of his disciples went back upon it, and walked no more with him, and Jesus said unto the twelve, Will ye also go away ? Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go ? Thou hast the words of eternal life **.

Persons thus rightly disposed will immediately see farther, that as they are not to be disgusted with scripture, because they cannot account for every thing, or understand every thing, to their wish ; so neither are they to study it merely to understand as much of it as they can, which is only indulging an unedifying curiosity ; and yet less, to understand more of it than others, which is nursing up vanity, and may tempt them to invent new and even dangerous meanings, in order to seem more knowing than they are. But their business is, to apply to those points first, and dwell on those most, which have the closest connection with their future happiness : for they are necessary ; the rest are only, in their several degrees, useful. And as right practice is the end of faith ; and the firmest and most explicit faith, which doth not produce it, is nothing ; and a weak and general faith, which doth produce it, will be accepted : the practical passages ought certainly to have our principal regard ; ever comprehending those, which express the obligations of Christian piety and moral self-government, as well as justice and mercy. We shall indeed do very well, besides occasional readings of particular chapters, to peruse both Testaments in their order : only it will be advisable to begin with, and go oftenest through, the New ; as exhibiting what we are to believe and to do, more fully, and without such a mixture, as there is in the Old, of things belonging solely to the former dispensation. But then the regularity of this course ought not to hinder us from selecting chiefly, and perusing most frequently, such passages of both, as lay before us, in the most influencing

* John vi. 66, 67, 68,

encing manner, the common doctrines and common duties of our holy profession. Other things may with safety be lightly passed over, and imperfectly or not at all understood, till we are first well settled in these: which very happily are the plain-er parts of scripture, as well as the more important.

Still, even in respect of these, and much more therefore of others, it is requisite that we proceed with some judgment and care: that we make use of the same rules for understanding our bibles, which we do for understanding other books; and such also, as the peculiar nature of this book points out: that we never interpret any text in a sense contrary to the dictates of reason, or to other texts more clear or more numerous, or to the visible design and drift of the whole passage: that we keep always in our view what goes before and follows after; for the connection is often very strong, where it is not extremely obvious: that we suppose not every verse to be a separate sentence of itself; nor every chapter to have a separate subject, that begins and ends with it; for these divisions are intirely human, and sometimes not discreetly made; but that we read on without stopping, as far, and no farther, than the same matter appears to be continued: and, (which is a direction of great moment) that we apply the sayings of the holy penmen, only to the things of which they are treating, not to others, which perhaps were far from their thoughts; unless a just argument can be drawn from the former to the latter. We should also be careful to take both single words, and phrases comprehending several, not always in the meaning which they bear in our daily conversation, but in such as other places of scripture require or permit: understanding them literally where we can, but figuratively where we must: should make such abatements from strong expressions, such restrictions and exceptions to general expressions, and such allowances for the whole manner of speaking, as we perceive the nature of the thing, together with the usage and custom of the sacred writers, demands. Without such equity as this, in some degree, one half of the compositions, that appear in the world, would be heaps of absurdity. And if the bible needs more of it, than later books of nearer countries, it also deserves it infinitely better: and refusing it is both perverseness and impiety. These easy cautions will enable persons of almost the lowest capacity and improvements, that either can read scripture, or have the means of hearing it read,

read, to acquire so competent a knowledge of what is most needful to be known, as will fully justify the Psalmist's eno-
mium, that *the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple* *.

Not that even the learned, and much less the illiterate, act either with humility or prudence, if in reading holy writ they rely wholly on their own judgment unassisted. For God hath made the help of others extremely necessary to our understanding of his word, as well as his works. Men of great abilities and attainments, by trusting to themselves, have gone sadly wrong: and men of no other advantages, than a teachable disposition, have arrived at a most beneficial acquaintance with religious truths. For God *hides things from the wise and prudent* in their own opinion, which he *reveals unto babes* †: *resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble* ‡. Nor let it be imagined, that such must therefore depend altogether in every thing on the authority of their spiritual guides. For as in matters of science, or common business, what a man doth not see of himself, he may have shewn him notwithstanding, and then see it as truly and fully, as if it had been his own original discovery: so in matters of revelation, one, who would otherwise have made small progress, or, it may be, great mistakes, yet having the main articles of it methodically explained to him, in discourses on his catechism, and occasionally inculcated in sermons, or answers to the questions which he asks in private, may, by comparing what he is thus taught, with what he reads in his bible, come by degrees, not to believe implicitly, but to discern evidently, the genuine sense of its fundamental doctrines and precepts. In which case, his faith rests no longer on the word of man, but that of God, whether he can answer all the specious objections against it or not: which few people can do in any thing that they believe of any kind. We should therefore conscientiously take all fit opportunities of learning instruction from those, who are set apart to give it. For the *priest's lips* are appointed to *keep knowledge*; and the people to *seek the law at his mouth* §: not with a blind submission to whatever he shall affirm; but with so much regard at least, as in other professions the more ignorant pay to the
more

* Ps. xix. 7.

† Matt. xi. 25. Luke x. 21.

‡ James iv. 6.

§ Mal. ii. 7.

more skilful. Nor are we confined to respect only the sentiments of the particular teachers, whom we statedly attend, but ought to have much greater deference for the general persuasion of Christ's church, particularly our own branch of it, and a proportionable one for that of every knowing and good person; always entertaining some distrust of ourselves, when we differ from these. The exercise of our best judgment, and a modest attention to that of others, are the joint means, which our Maker hath instituted for the understanding of his will, natural and revealed. They, who use them uprightly, and they alone, may hope for pardon of their ignorance and errors. And were any one to continue so ignorant to the last, as to believe the truths contained in holy writ, only because those about him told him they were such: yet might he have the happiness of acquiring, even by the means of this most implicit faith, dispositions of piety and virtue unattainable otherwise, and sufficient to qualify him for eternal happiness.

But sometimes Christians of a deeper insight, real or imaginary, into scripture, instead of complaining, like others, that necessary doctrines and precepts are not clear enough there, are tempted to think them expressed so much more familiarly, and repeated so much oftener than needed, that the places, in which they are inculcated thus, may be passed over, as not designed for such as they are. Now would they but consider even the least entertaining of them for a competent time, with a spirit of seriousness, there would start out of them information or admonition, of which they little think, and for which they have great occasion. Or should they find nothing that is new to them, they would at least have cause given them to recollect with humble thankfulness, not only that their Christian brethren do, and *are made wise unto salvation* * by these despised plain passages, and by these only, but that from them, above the rest, proceeded all that knowledge of the redemption of man, and almost all that knowledge of natural religion also, which the most learned enjoy; and which hath made even the vulgar of the gospel dispensation superior to the ablest and best instructed amongst the heathen: a superiority, which will be lost again, in proportion as regard to the word of God decays.

VOL. I.

3 R

But

* 2 Tim. iii. 15.

But though, in reading it, we must all begin with attending, and ever after attend chiefly to the first elements of Christian instruction, or, to speak in St. Peter's language, *as new born babes desire the sincere milk of the word, that we may grow thereby* *; and know it for a bad sign, if we cannot relish the food of simplest taste, and easiest digestion: yet keeping to this wholly is the business of those alone, who, as the epistle to the Hebrews expresses it, *are unskilful, or rather, unexperienced, in the word of righteousness*; which hath in it also *strong meat, belonging to them that are of full age, who, by reason of use, have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil* †. We shall thrive best by the use of lighter nourishment first: and mixing the more solid with it prematurely, may both check our growth, and hurt our health. But when we have acquired a due firmness and vigour, we shall both preserve and increase it, by feeding on other things likewise, throughout the scripture: the several parts of which I shall briefly go over once again for your completer direction.

The historical books of the Old Testament may be read carelessly with as little improvement as any other history. But therefore to prevent this, we are to reflect as we go along: and observe, according to the nature of each article, how it sets before us the sovereignty, the superintendency, the wisdom, the justice, the mercy of God; the amiableness and rewards of good actions, the deformity and punishment of wicked ones; the heights of piety and virtue, at which the saints of old time arrived, as we may by imitating them; the dreadful sins into which they sometimes fell, as we shall, if we take not warning. *For all these things happened to them for ensamples; and they are written for our admonition* ‡. As to the danger, which may arise from the bad deeds of good persons, related without censure, and actions that seem unwarrantable, yet are told with approbation, and were therefore either done by God's extraordinary commission, or grounded on circumstances, of which we are not well apprized: I have spoken of these in a former discourse; and shewn you, that, in such circumstances, the precepts, not the histories of the bible, must be our rule.

In the book of *Job*, some parts are highly poetical, and proportionably dark: for which reason our attention must be chiefly

ly

* 1 Pet. ii. 2.

† Heb. v. 13, 14.

‡ 1 Cor. x. 11.

ly paid to those others, which will amply recompense it, by exhibiting the noblest and most pleasing views of the majesty of the Almighty, of the patriarchal religion, of the exquisite beauties of humanity and charity, of the hard struggle of human virtue with heavy afflictions, and God's gracious acceptance of imperfect endeavours. *Ye have heard of the patience of Job : and have seen the end of the Lord ; that he is very pitiful, and of tender mercy **.

As to the *Psalms* : I have already explained to you the nature of those which contain imprecations. Of repeating them all in the church, I shall, God willing, speak some other time. Of reading them in private, I need only say, that with the exercise of but a common degree of judgment, every pious person will find it equally improving and delightful.

The *Proverbs* have scarce any obscurity, and much use. Concerning *Ecclesiastes* and the *Song of Solomon*, you have had, I hope, sufficient instructions for perusing them with benefit.

The prophetic writings abound in difficult passages ; but still more in plain ones, expressing the sublimest notions of piety and morals, the strongest preference of inward goodness to outward observances, the awfulest denunciations against wickedness of every kind, the most affectionate expostulations, the most inviting promises, the warmest and justest concern for public good : which the prophets manifested with so fearless and impartial a freedom, in telling both the body of the people, and the highest in authority, their duty and their sins, that the descendants of those who persecuted them when living, held their memories, when dead, in eternal honour ; doubly convinced of their mission from heaven, by the accomplishment of their predictions, and the singular worthiness of their conduct. In reading them therefore we must diligently attend to these interesting points, each in its proper place : observing also, along with them, the gradual unfolding of the great scheme of our redemption ; to which *we shall do well, even in these days of opener vision †, to take heed, as to a light shining in a dark place ‡* ; especially as it confirms to us, that *known unto God are all his works from the beginning §*. Such passages in their books, as relate to the affairs of distant heathen countries in ages long ago past, though of admirable use then, and not a

* James v. 11. † 1 Sam. iii. 1. ‡ 2 Pet. i. 19. § Acts xv. 18.

little still as parallels, we are neither likely nor concerned to understand fully. And such as belong to things yet future, especially to the times and circumstances of those things, are few, if any of them, fit for the unlearned to pry into particularly. Nay, the learned themselves, if they are prudent also, will observe what answer the angel gave to the prophet *Daniel*. *And I heard, but I understood not: then said I, O my Lord, what shall be the end of these things? And he said, Go thy way, Daniel; for the words are closed up, and sealed till the time of the end* *. When the proper season comes, possibly in some cases not before the event hath interpreted them, the prophecies will prove their own reality by their clearness; and strengthen, perhaps in an hour of much need, *the faith and patience of the saints* †: Thus it happened to the apostles. They understood not beforehand our Saviour's prediction, *Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*. But when he was risen from the dead, they remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said ‡.

But almost the whole of the *Gospels* is now so clear, and both the character and the precepts of our blessed Lord appear in them so truly divine; the zeal and charity of the first disciples in the *Acts* is so highly edifying, the spirit of the *Epistles* so genuinely Christian, and their practical rules are so completely instructive to all sorts of persons; that scarce any other direction can be wanted for the main of the New Testament, than to meditate on it continually. Some of the argumentative and occasional parts of *St. Paul's* writings indeed it is not easy to comprehend. A yet larger proportion of the *Revelation* of *St. John* is exceedingly mysterious. But nothing of this kind, in any part of scripture, needs either to discourage, or mislead us. Not to discourage us; for whatever is requisite to be understood, if it be put in one place obscurely, is doubtless put in some other plainly: nor to mislead us, because we may prudently suspend our judgment, and modestly be content with our ignorance of what is intended, though fully satisfied of its being a valuable truth. *Seek not out, saith the son of Sirach, the things that are too hard for thee, neither search the things that are above thy strength: But what is com-*
manded

* Dan. xii. 8, 9.

† Rev. xiii. 10.

‡ John ii. 19, 22.



manded thee, think thereupon with reverence : for it is not needful for thee to see with thine eyes the things that are in secret. Be not curious in unnecessary matters ; for more things are shewed unto thee, than men understand.*

Yet we are not to omit reading the abstruser texts, which have any appearance of relating to us : but follow the example of the blessed virgin, who *understood not* several of our Saviour's sayings, yet *kept them all in her heart* †. Were we only to learn humility thus, it would be enough ; but we shall come by degrees to apprehend far more than we expected, if we diligently *compare spiritual things with spiritual* ‡ : darker expressions with clearer, that are like or opposite to them : for contraries illustrate one another. In this laudable work, the marginal references in the latter editions of the bible will afford you most useful assistance : for they are very judiciously chosen. Such information also as you can get, (and you may get much from several books,) of the nature of the language of each Testament, and the history and notions of the times, when each book of it was written, will be extremely profitable : and the several excellent commentaries and paraphrases on the whole, or particular parts of it, still more : which therefore it is wonderful that so few Christians in proportion, of those who are well able, will be at the expence of purchasing for themselves ; especially considering how very much greater expences, that will turn either to no account or a bad one, they so little grudge, that they cannot be restrained from them.

But how successfully soever we may increase our knowledge of scripture, that alone is nothing. We must not think we have done with a passage as soon as we have understood it. If we had understood it instantly, our principal work was to come yet : and they are strangely wrong, who apply so closely to study difficult places, that they forget to make due reflections on the plain. The word of God was written to give us, not merely a speculative apprehension, but an experimental sense and feeling of holy things, comfortable or terrifying, as our spiritual state requires. *I rejoice at thy word, as one that findeth great spoil*, saith the Psalmist §. *To this man will I look, saith the Lord, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit,*
and

* Eccclus. iii. 21, 22, 23.

† 1 Cor. ii. 13.

‡ Luke ii. 50, 51.

§ Ps. cxix. 162.

*and that trembleth at my word**. Too many alas, have no conception of this efficacy in scripture: and no wonder, for they have never seriously endeavoured to have any. But let them try in earnest, and they will infallibly succeed, if they use proper means. We read of some, what will be true of all in the same condition, that *the word did not profit them, not being mixed with faith*†. God indeed can operate according to his own pleasure: but humanly speaking, persons will not be influenced by what they disbelieve; or much, by what they believe but faintly. Nay, should they labour to make the strongest impressions on their own souls, without applying to Him, whose *gift saving faith is*‡, their efforts would be vain. But let any one jointly strive and pray for a deep conviction, that the bible is the appointed instrument of his religious proficiency: then let him read it, not as performing a task, he knows not why, from which he had rather be excused; not to outshine others in readiness of quotation, or plausibility of interpreting, or *oppositions of science falsely so called*§; not to furnish himself with weapons for debate and controversy, much less for uncharitableness and abuse; but to amend his inward state towards God: that as the excellent collect in our liturgy directs, *by the patience in well doing and comfort in virtuous suffering, which we learn of his holy word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life*¶. Let him accordingly stop on fit occasions, and think: What consolations doth this passage administer to me? What acknowledgments to heaven doth this declaration require from me? What fear for myself doth this threatening call for? What duty doth this precept or pattern point out to me? of what sin doth it convince me? against what dangers doth it warn me? Is my character and behaviour suitable to this command or exhortation, this description or good example? or do I see myself here, under another name, reprov'd, condemn'd, stigmatized? Have I acquired that sense of my own sinfulness and weakness, of God's holiness and justice, of my need of the merits of Christ and the grace of the divine Spirit, which the whole tenour of scripture inculcates: or am I still inclined to stand or fall by my own righteousness? Faithful pains taken for some time in
such

* Is. lxvi. 2.

† Heb. iv. 2.

‡ Eph. ii. 8i

§ 1 Tim. vi. 20.

¶ Second Sunday in Advent.

such home questions, without forcing unnatural uses out of any text, but only dwelling on those that fairly present themselves, will make us experience a divine virtue in the sacred writings, piercing first and healing afterwards; which, provided we are not satisfied with being piously moved at the time, and then relapsing into what we were before, but continue the inquiry steadily, and carry on every feeling into practice, will assuredly transform us into what we ought to be. Possibly indeed we may not all receive a very sensible benefit very soon. Alterative medicines often produce their effect but slowly: and the most perfect regimen of diet sweetens and nourishes by unperceived degrees. We have surely no title to be impatient under the hands of our heavenly physician: perfect recovery will at length be the certain consequence of his treatment of us: and every single ingredient in the great remedy, his holy word, and every direction for the use of it, will contribute its share to our cure. Let us therefore conscientiously observe all his orders, each in their due place; and as the only one, for which there is room left at present, let us intreat his blessing on our humble endeavours, that receiving the seed of *the word into a good and honest heart*, we may *bring forth fruit with patience**: using for that purpose the petitions of his servant *David*. *Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes, and I shall keep it unto the end. Give me understanding, and I shall keep thy law: yea, I shall keep it with my whole heart. Make me to go in the path of thy commandments: for therein is my desire*†.

* Luke viii. 15.

† Ps. cxix. 33, 34, 35.

